

Consumer awareness on sustainable apparel product consumption

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Introduction

The World Commission on Environment and Development has defined sustainability as social environmental and economic concerns with the goal of preservation (Hill & Lee, 2012). The multibillion dollar apparel industry has many negative impacts on the environment through all most every stage of its product life cycle starting from fiber, fabric to product manufacturing, shipping, and transportation, stores distribution, retailing, to the end product disposable process. (Shaw *et al*;2006;Hill and Lee,2012).According to Singhal(2012) there is a higher (per capita) apparel consumption growth in developing countries including Sri Lanka. This trend is expected to continue through 2020 and beyond. However consumers have a low level of understanding on these environmental impacts caused from the apparel manufacturing and retailing. Therefore this had investigated consumer awareness and their perceptions on such issues and their intentions towards sustainable apparel consumption. In order to fulfill these research objectives research was intended to explore to extend which consumers are aware of sustainable apparel consumption and actions consumers will be expected to take to minimize this issue in future.

Methodology

The research questions called for an approach to measure Sri Lankan consumer awareness on sustainable apparel product. As a result a marketing survey was conducted through a self-administered online questionnaire which was developed to measure the research variables as well as to gather demographic data. Sampling method was judgment sample of the non probability sampling criteria. Awareness regarding the sustainable apparel was measured through three drivers; ecological awareness, 3 R concept of eco-friendly; reduce, reuse and recycle and fair trade consumption. These aspects were adapted from the literature and reflective judgments were made via preliminary focus group interviews. The items were measured on a five point likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).The population of the study specially focused on Generation Y consumers. People born during the 1980s and early 1990s are included in to the Generation Y cohort also known as millennial or net generation. It is considered as a large and powerful market segment with a long

future of potential (Jin Ma *et al*;2012). The survey questionnaire consisted of 20 questions and was carried out between August to October 2014. The sample consisted of both male and female Colombo city based upper-middle working class, aged 25-35. The population of the study was 60.

Result and Discussion

Results of the study revealed that overall consumer awareness on sustainable apparel product was limited. However respondents demonstrated a very high level ecological awareness (impact of the human activity upon the environment). Nevertheless respondents have a low level of awareness of the environmental impacts of apparel production.

Moreover from the study it is proven that consumer's awareness on eco-friendly concepts such as reduce, reuse and recycle was considerable high. Almost 50 percent of the respondents had learned about eco-friendly in some capacity. Yet perceptions around eco-clothing were negative. Few respondents described it as not trendy and fashionable. To seek more insights on environmental issue associated with apparel manufacturing process, an eco friendly apparel label was proposed. In general respondents has shown as interest on the idea of an eco friendly apparel label, but they would not pay more than 10% more for casual clothes with an eco-label. But they would pay up to 20% more for made to measure tailored products. Moreover from the study it is proven that consumer's awareness on ethical issues within apparel manufacturing was considerable low. Only few were aware of how workers in the developing county are treated and fewer amounts of respondents have recognized fair-trade as a social movement. Also the interest in fair-trade products was negative because they did not know about fair trade labels and also the perception of those products would be more expensive than other ordinary clothing.

Conclusions

This study focused on providing insights on sustainability and environmental consciousness of consumers. Generation Y consumers is environmentally and socially concerned and aware of many global issues. Yet research findings show a low level of awareness of sustainability in relation to apparel product. Among the three key drivers of sustainability, consumer's knowledge on eco-friendly concepts is considerably high. Yet perception of such product consumption is low. Consumer's awareness on fair trade apparel was the lowest. Lack of awareness of the negative environmental impact of the apparel sector may possibly be a barrier to sustainable purchasing. Therefore a comprehensive understanding of current perceptions of sustainability is needed for successful consumer centered market strategy. Thus results stress out the need for more focused educational and marketing campaigns.

This study utilized a qualitative research and is limited to Sri Lanka. Future research in this field could integrate quantitative methods to further enrich the study. Researchers and academics could undertake further research and generate theories and conceptual frameworks which apply to the sustainable apparel consumption. Research findings have a high level of implications especially for retailers. Retailers could implement more sustainable concepts, policies and practices with regards to sustainable apparel production and consumption.

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