

Evaluation of sustainable clothing – Some insights on customer perspectives

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Abstract

Clothes are important elements of our everyday lives and human clothing is worn for safety, practical and social purposes. A large amount of clothing is produced, purchased and disposed on a daily basis, and consumers tend to purchase clothing because it is inexpensive and not because it is what they need at the moment. Most of the clothes purchased are used for one season mainly because fashion is changing constantly and customers like to keep up with the trends and another explanation is many of these clothes are made of weak and inexpensive materials that result in a short lifespan.

Key words : Sustainable clothing, consumer behaviour, disposal, environmental issues.

1 Introduction

The global economy's continued development has created major environmental issues for the world and the eco-system, the natural forest has been destroyed or damaged, many animals are at risk, and the natural resources are overused [1]. The clothing and textiles industry is one of the major contributors to negative environmental impacts [2]. The growing demand for fast fashion has resulted in factories using environmentally harmful practices in their manufacturing cycle as a means of trying to keep up with these demands [3]. By using cheap labour in Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, China and Vietnam, the global market has made it easy for companies to sell clothing products at low prices. This has resulted in more frequent purchases of clothing by consumers. Fast fashion business model is popular among retailers across the globe, and the South African retail industry is no exception to this. Most of the clothing manufactured and worn today are made of a mixture of cotton (a natural fibre) and polyester (a synthetic fibre). Both natural and synthetic fibres contribute to environmental degradation from the development stage of the apparel life cycle to the disposal stage [4,5]. The care phase of the clothing lifecycle has the greatest overall negative effect on the environment [6,7]. For example, polyester fibre shedding during the laundry process will release approximately 700,000 micro plastics and, as they cannot be fully filtered out by wastewater treatment plants, end up infiltrating and accumulating in marine ecosystems [8]. In order to achieve a sustainable and cohesive relationship between the economy and the environment, it is the duty of all consumers and organizations to use natural resources effectively, minimize emissions and protect the global environment and the ecosystem for future generations (Wang 2010). According to The True Cost Film (2015), sustainable fashion considers the social, natural and economic "price" paid in fashion manufacturing [9]. Sustainability in fashion can only be completely accomplished if all levels and stages of the product life cycle are thoroughly investigated to ensure that more environmentally and socially sustainable practices are implemented during the manufacturing and consumption process. Once viewed as a trend, sustainable fashion today is widely perceived as an influential part of the environmental movement [10]. In their study, Joy and Pena (2017) states that, as consumers become more aware of the processes involved in the production of clothing their connection with nature will set off a new viewpoint on apparel, one that actively seeks sustainably produced fabrics and manufacturing processes, and that sees slow fashion, given higher costs, as much more attractive when compared to fast fashion [11]. Globally a number of research has been conducted on the topic however, there seems to be a lack of in-depth research within the South Africa context, particularly on the issue of behaviour and motivating factors for consumers towards sustainable fashion.

Fast fashion

Fashion is a representation of the social, political, economic and artistic forces at any given time [12]. The word "fast" in fast fashion refers not only to the speed of production, but also to the speed with which consumers want continuous novelty. A fast fashion network enables companies to quickly respond to rising market demand by replenishing inventories and adding more fashion styles. Fast fashion has emerged as a predominant business model by selling massive amounts of garments at inexpensive prices, causing skyrocketing of fabric

consumption. The global health costs associated with producing cheap clothes are huge. Because of the rapid pace of the fashion industry, companies hire manufacturers who hire subcontractors in turn to produce their products. This cycle transfers the risk of unsafe conditions and unethical treatment down the supply chain to low-paid employees who are the ones who actually produce the garments. The fast fashion work ethic has resulted in devastating social and environmental implications for the workers at the garment factory and the society in which the factories are located. These social and environmental costs have been highlighted as below

The Social cost

The Environmental cost

Sustainable fashion

Textile and clothing life cycle

Raw materials phase

Manufacturing phase

Distribution and Transportation phase

Consumption phase

Post consumption phase

Consumer Behaviour and Attitudes

When it comes to sustainable growth, consumer preferences and the role of environmental considerations in the everyday buying decisions of consumers should be the focus of attention [13]. In developed countries, consumers have a fair amount of knowledge about the environmental impacts of new industrial production and the effects of current consumption behaviour. Despite the fact that consumers are concerned and knowledgeable about the ethical behaviour of companies, this does not always translate into consumer choices that favour ethical companies, as consumers do not want to make ethical choices that will inconvenience them [14].

The imbalance between consumer attitudes towards the environment and their behaviour in buying clothing can be clarified by the fact that consumers focus their purchasing decisions on factors other than the environment, such as price, fit and style [15]. Attitude is defined as a mental state of enthusiasm which affects the response to all purposes and conditions, and reinforces the intent to act [16]. The behaviour of consumers in relation to green products is linked to the values and emotions of consumers, and each person has a different value structure based on their experience and education. Behaviour is said to be about the same as behavioural intent, which can be extracted from a combination of the consumer's attitude towards purchasing the product and the subjective behavioural norms [17]. To successfully navigate current environmental issues, eco-fashion companies need to consider what factors impact consumer purchasing habits and figure out what they can do to effectively steer them toward more sustainable patterns of consumption. Marketers need to be aware of the gap between the level of concern claimed by the consumer for sustainability and the actual purchase behaviour. The gap in attitude-behaviour can be seen as the biggest obstacle to sustainable fashion growth, requiring in-depth research and realistic approaches to resolve the issue. There are several factors that influence the consumer's desire to participate in sustainable consumption behaviour such as the overall positive effects it will have on the environment, however there are also barriers that stop consumers from purchasing these products.

Influencing factors in consumer buying behaviour

Consumers may have some attitudes about how and where they purchase their clothes, and what they think is the best way to dispose of their clothing or recycle it. Actual behaviour is often affected by factors that are not known to the consumer, and there are factors that can change the behaviour of their clothing consumption. Consumer's buying behaviour refers to the selection, purchase and use of goods and services to the fulfilment of one's needs and wants [18]. Consumer behaviour requires different processes, as the consumer will first try to figure out what commodities he wants to buy, and then choose only those commodities that offer greater benefit. Consumer behaviour is affected by many factors, and while some of these factors cannot be controlled by marketers, it is still important to understand all of them [20]. With regards to sustainable clothing, consumer buyer behaviour can be influenced by four major factors which are cultural, social, personal and psychological.

Consumer barriers on sustainable fashion

Although clothing has been recognized as a basic human need, clothing choices are influenced by many people's need for identity and esteem [21]. One of the many challenges for marketers is to differentiate their sustainable products from competitive products, and to convey this to consumers; and to understand what makes a brand more sustainable. While the demand for sustainable production is growing and is the only way to preserve the environment, marketers find it difficult for their organizations to move completely from conventional ways of doing things to become a fully sustainable organization. The challenge is that when it comes to sustainability problems, most consumers are uninformed, and if two retail brands were to sell virtually identical clothing items at different price points, most consumers will go for the cheapest item. Another difficulty retail businesses face is obtaining and exchanging knowledge from the early production process [22]. Traditionally the retail buyers' task was to find the right manufacturer, the right fabric and the right design. These days, the company has to weigh other aspects of corporate social responsibility and sustainability, such as understanding the origin of the fabric and the processes used to produce the fabric before they can agree to integrate it into their product line. Consumers are also faced with their own challenges when it comes to consumption of sustainable clothing.

Lack of information

Cost

Lack of concern

Time consuming

Lack of variety

Choice of frame work

The gap in attitude-behaviour can be seen as the biggest obstacle to sustainable fashion growth, requiring in-depth research and realistic approaches to resolve the issue. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was chosen as a framework for this study to investigate the various factors influencing a consumer's purchasing behaviour and commitment for sustainable fashion. The theory has been applied in several studies that investigate environmental behaviour, as well as research directly related to fashion and clothing. The Theory is applicable to actions that are not completely influenced by will, such as buying behaviours where other influences play a role in decision making. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (refer to figure 1), has four components that inform the end behaviour:

attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control and intention [23]. In TPB, behavioural intent is influenced by a complex combination of variables of attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control. Actual behaviour is again primarily derived from behavioural intent, but is mediated to some degree by perceived behavioural control.

Figure

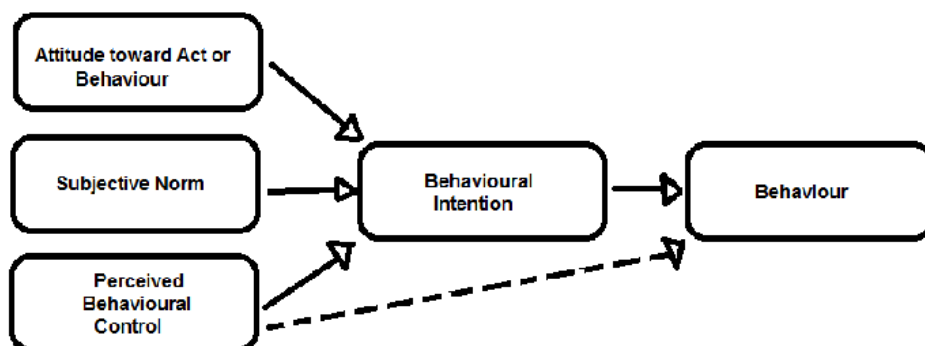


Figure 1 The theory of planned behaviour

Attitude, attitude has been defined as an individual's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an attitude object. The type of behaviour influences the degree of intention-behaviour consistency [38]. Subjective norm is the influence of the normative beliefs of an individual (beliefs that emerge from social pressure) that others support or disapprove of a specific action [39,40].

Subjective norm, Perceived behavioural control and intention have been considered.

Addressing the crux of the problem

Despite its affordability and accessibility, it has become clear that fast fashion is doing more harm to the world than its perceived benefits. Although some manufacturers and retailers are increasingly moving towards a more sustainable method of production, this change also poses challenges [41]. As far as the research problem is concerned, customers seem to have the dominant position, as their attitude and behaviour towards sustainable clothing is what will motivate most manufacturers and retailers to provide only sustainable products [42]. It is therefore important to understand the motivation behind consumer purchases of clothing and their attitude towards sustainable clothing. If consumers can understand that even though sustainability comes with its own challenges, they are certainly not as costly as fast fashion is to the environment and sweatshops workers [43]. This might persuade consumers to invest in better quality clothes and to wear, care and keep them longer and balance out the perceived financial, social and psychological risks of clothing purchase [44]. The identified issues and gaps from this review will be used as the motivation for conducting this research. Some of the outcomes from this literature study shows that most consumers are not aware of the environmental and social effects of the apparel industry; conscious consumers find it hard to trust retailers about their sustainable goods because of the lack of transparency during the manufacturing process; many consumers don't know how to locate the stores that sell ethical products with just a few that indicate they know where to buy environmentally friendly clothing; cost is a huge factor on sustainable clothing purchase decision; educating consumers on sustainable clothing might have an overall positive outcome on purchasing behaviours; and attitude-behaviour gap plays a huge role in the study of consumers' purchase intentions on sustainable clothing. The review also revealed that while previous studies have been conducted on clothing consumption in the

South African market, there is limited research that focuses on the sustainability issue of clothing consumption.

Design methodology

The following aspects have been considered

Research Design

Sampling

Data Collection

Questionnaire format

Statistical Data Analysis

Reliability and validity

Ethical Implications

Consent

Anonymity, Privacy and Confidentiality of Respondents

The findings

The following aspects have been considered in the study

Demographics of the sample

Consumer awareness on sustainable fashion

Motivation behind consumer's purchasing behaviour.

Consumer clothing disposal behaviour

Clothing sustainability is very complex and while consumers might have knowledge of what sustainable clothing is, it is the lack of understanding why it is important to support it that seems to be the main challenge. People can only know what they're exposed to on a regular basis which is linked to what is common knowledge. Sustainable fashion is still a niche topic and other measures need to be put in place to ensure that more information is readily available for all consumers of clothing. While the overall results seem to agree with previous research that consumers have some knowledge about sustainability in clothing, it is important to note that consumers are diverse in their concerns and due to the small sample size, these results cannot be generalised as they might vary widely if the sample size was larger. Findings have shown that style and quality are the main motivation for buying clothing. One of the key goals of sustainability is to create goods that can last longer and thereby avoid fast fashion and mass manufacturing.

This puts sustainable clothing in a desirable position, since it is known to provide quality goods, as this will result in consumers buying these products, because quality is one of the key motives of consumers. On the topic of clothing disposal behaviour, customers seem to be on the right track, as the majority have said they know how to recycle clothing and are familiar with the recycling options available. They also seem to know the benefits of proper clothing disposal, and understanding the benefits means that every consumer's decision-making is motivated. This may be why the clothing disposal questions scored high, as there is a motive behind the behaviour.

Problems and prospects

The analysis faced several limitations that must be considered when examining the results. The first limitations were time and funding. Although e-mail was thought to be the most cost-saving and time-consuming way of delivering the questionnaire, most potential respondents lost interest in completing the survey due to the need to open the e-mail attachment, complete the survey, save and send back the e-mail. As they consider online surveys to be easier, most of them would prefer a link to the survey. Also, on the subject of

signing the consent form, not everybody has a digital signature, so some of it meant copying, signing, scanning, and email, which seemed to them time consuming. Another limitation was the poor response that resulted in a limited sample size. While both males and females were included, a comparison between the genders could not be observed due to the limited proportion of male respondents. Although findings have been addressed through support from other research, due to limited studies on the subject in South Africa, most of the previous studies that support these findings are not based in South Africa and therefore make it a challenge to use them as consumer behaviour varies across the globe due to various factors of influence. It is important to note that, despite these limitations, the results of this research can still be used as secondary data on future research on the subject, and more in-depth research with wider participation can be carried out on the basis of the results obtained.

Conclusion and future perspectives

The focus has been to study consumers' behaviour regarding green/sustainable clothing. The following research objectives were formulated in order to achieve the objective of this research study: (1) to explore consumer awareness on sustainable fashion, (2) to determine the motivation behind consumers' purchasing behaviour on sustainable clothing and (3) to determine the consumers' motivation behind their clothing disposal behaviour. The study concludes with three key points, one being that motive plays a huge role in the purchasing decision making of sustainable clothes. The second one is that information on sustainable clothing should be readily available to consumers so they can make more informed decisions. Lastly, clothing disposal options should be available for all consumers of clothing. Future research derived from these results may focus on informing consumers about sustainable clothing and assessing consumption patterns before and after lessons learned. Another emphasis could be on clothing retailers where they can be interviewed on their position on sustainability, which could push retailers to make their position on sustainability accessible to customers. The availability of information could lead to more informed choices by consumers. Finally, on the subject of clothing disposal, future research could concentrate on the availability of recycle bins, clothing retailers providing recycle bins in stores and educating customers of both recycling and up-cycle choices.

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