

CONSUMER PREFERENCES TOWARDS COTTON

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ABSTRACT

This research looks into why cotton has lost its favorable spot as the number one fabric. To do this, we studied background literature on the subject, analyzed content collected from web comments, and conducted our own survey. We found that consumers still view cotton favorably, but they simply no longer care about the fabric make-up of their garments. Although consumers associate cotton with positive attributes, they are not paying attention to the fibers that go into the clothes they wear at the time of making the buying decision. Consumers also found synthetic fibers to be very innovative, especially in categories like athletic wear. Through our survey, we discovered that consumers did not see the potential for cotton to be an innovative fiber. **Overall, our research found that the main reasons for cotton's market share loss is due to consumer's indifference towards what fibers go into their garments, as well as the rise of innovative synthetics.**

OBJECTIVES

For centuries, cotton reigned as the most popular fiber type. However, in the late 90's, synthetics took over as consumers top fiber choice. Cotton has lost a considerable amount of its market share to synthetics, and we aim to find out why. To do this, we had two main objectives:

- Explore how consumers perceive cotton, and if those views are favorable or not.
- Discover if consumers care about what fibers go into the clothes they wear.

By researching these questions, we aimed to find out how cotton can once again reign supreme.

BACKGROUND/LITERATURE

Through research, we learned how big the textile industry is; in 2015 the global textile demand was nearly 90 million tons. We also discovered that in the 1960's, two thirds of the global textile demand was for cotton. However, in 2015 this number dropped to 30% (Krifa and Stevens, 2016). This causes a huge problem for the cotton industry, because of the 90 million ton demand for textiles, cotton only sold 24.8 million tons.

Consumers still view cotton as a safe and reliable fabric, and three out of four consumers say they think cotton makes higher quality garments (Cotton Incorporated, 2016). However, clearly this belief isn't being reflected in sales, as cotton continues to decline. Because of this, we decided to continue our research with a focus on the future of cotton, rather than the past. A new important question developed: do consumers view cotton as innovative?

We also conducted some research on cotton's main competitor: synthetics. One of synthetics' key advantages compared to cotton is the fiber's versatility. Unfortunately, cotton is unable to keep up with fashion's changing trends as quickly as synthetics. Many consumers have also come to expect the technology and advancements that synthetics provide, as they have grown up always having them available (Just-Style, 2017). Even if cotton was able to compete with synthetics versatility, would consumers be able to view cotton as innovative as synthetics'?

Essentially, we want to understand the reason that consumers are not purchasing as much cotton as they used to. Do customers care what the clothes they purchase are made of? Do they value cotton apparel when they shop? Do customers view cotton as technologically advanced? And, if not, can they view cotton getting to a stage where it is as advanced as synthetics? To tackle these questions, we turned to content analysis and our own survey.

METHODS

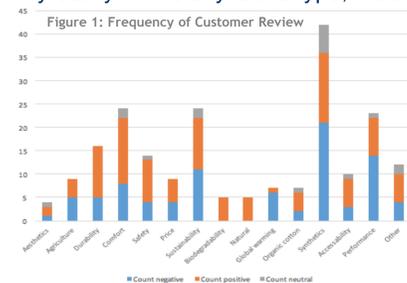
We used two main methods to gather data: content analysis from online sources and a survey we created that focused on our research questions. To get customer feedback, we started by gathering comments from different outlets on social media including YouTube, Instagram, blogs and news articles. Comments were collected based on if they contained important words relating to the research questions. Some of these words included cotton, synthetics, organic cotton, nylon, and polyester. Our team found about 200 comments that directly related to the research questions. From 200 comments, we agreed on the following categories to code each comment: aesthetics, agriculture, durability, comfort, safety, price, sustainability, naturalness, global warming, organic cotton, synthetics, performance, and accessibility.

The next method we used was a survey with snowball sampling constructed on Qualtrics, consisting of 20 questions. We dove deeper into how consumers perceive cotton, as well as give them a chance to leave any additional opinions on cotton they wanted to share.

At the end of the survey, we asked questions based on the respondents' demographics to contextualize our data results.

RESULTS

The majority of user comments about cotton had to do with synthetics. Performance, comfort, and sustainability were all also very important. Figure 1 reflects how often each topic was brought up in the comments section. Performance, comfort, and sustainability each took up 11% of consumer comments. Commenters were very open with their displeasure when a synthetic fiber or cotton fiber were not breathable, or made them hot in warm climates. Similarly, they were very enthusiastic when they found a fiber wicked away their moisture, regardless if it was a synthetic or natural fiber. Sustainability was a topic that consumers showed considerable passion about when commenting: they found the practices that go into creating cotton garments to be a major downfall of the fabric. Seemingly the least important aspects of cotton to consumers were aesthetics, biodegradability, and naturalness. Due to our exploratory research, we were unsurprised that few consumers cared about the difference in fibers' aesthetics, as synthetics can very easily mimic any fabric type, including cotton.



Innovation was a topic we wanted to find more about after conducting our comment collection, especially after seeing how many consumers were enthusiastic about active wear features. We found that consumers did not have a strong opinion on cotton's innovation, and 25% simply did not have any opinion. Thirty nine percent of respondents stated they care strongly about the fiber content of their clothing, and only 30% reported that they always check garment tag when shopping.

Answer	Cotton is an innovative fabric		Cotton has the ability to become an innovative fabric in the future.	
	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly agree	13.91%	32	22.17%	51
Somewhat agree	29.57%	68	36.09%	83
Somewhat disagree	22.17%	51	7.83%	18
Strongly disagree	10.00%	23	2.61%	6
Neither agree nor disagree	24.35%	56	31.30%	72
Total	100%	230	100%	230

RESULTS CONTINUED

Out of the 235 respondents, only 14.47% strongly agreed with the statement "Buying 100% cotton clothing in general is very important to me." Our respondents did prefer cotton over synthetic materials: 171 people said they strongly agreed or somewhat agreed, while only 35 said they somewhat disagreed and strongly disagreed. 29 respondents had no opinion.

Answer	Buying 100% cotton clothing in general is very important to me.		I do not care about the fiber content of my clothing.		I prefer cotton to synthetic materials, like nylon or polyester.	
	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Strongly agree	14.47%	34	8.51%	20	31.06%	73
Somewhat agree	38.30%	90	19.15%	45	41.70%	98
Somewhat disagree	15.74%	37	26.81%	63	13.19%	31
Strongly disagree	9.36%	22	38.72%	91	1.70%	4
Neither agree nor disagree	22.13%	52	6.81%	16	12.34%	29
Total	100%	235	100%	235	100%	235

DISCUSSION

Our research found similar results to what other researchers found: consumers claim to prefer cotton. However, we did not find it to be at as high of a rate as other research concluded; about 52% of our respondents stated buying 100% cotton garments is important to them. Only 27% of our respondents cared about the fiber content of their clothing. This proved our hypothesis; even if consumers prefer cotton to synthetics, they are not paying attention to what is in the garments they buy. Although 73% of respondents stated they prefer cotton to synthetic materials, they are not checking what is in the clothing they buy. Seventy two percent of respondents claimed they can tell the fiber content of garments without looking at the tag, but with all the advancements in synthetics, it is now nearly impossible to tell the difference. So, even when customers may think they are buying cotton, without checking the tag, there is no way to be certain.

Customers seemed to have no real opinion on whether or not cotton is an innovative fabric. We identified innovation as an important aspect in fibers, as many consumers look for it when shopping. So, it does not bode well for the cotton industry if consumers do not have an opinion on the innovativeness of cotton. Through surveying, the main problem with cotton seemed to be that consumers simply don't care about the fabric of their clothing anymore. Fiber content is not a concern for the modern day shopper.

SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

We found an important discrepancy for cotton that hasn't been identified by the literature we reviewed: consumers do not see cotton as innovative, or as having the ability to innovate. Even if cotton does innovate, consumers simply do not care about their clothing's fabric content.

The current consumer has more options than ever before, with new types of fibers constantly developing. Due to the increase in fibers, and consumers indifference towards fabric-type when buying, cotton has found itself lost in the array of fibers. Cotton truly needs to focus on its benefits above synthetics if it wants to gain consumers back. Many consumers don't care about the difference between fibers, so they don't bother to check tags. If consumers had a strong preference, they would have a reason to look further into their garments' content. To make itself relevant, and to put more consumers in 100% cotton garments, cotton needs to differentiate itself as an important fabric.

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