

# CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF COTTON SUSTAINABILITY

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout our extensive research, we studied consumer perceptions of sustainable cotton apparel to better understand their level of awareness and their purchasing decisions. We found our information from literature research as well as conducting our own survey to gauge consumer perceptions. Our findings show that they have an awareness, but not extensive knowledge on the subject and they favor certain aspects of sustainable apparel over others.

## OBJECTIVES

Through our research we intend to :

- Learn what marketing tools consumers are most receptive to
- Discover what motivates customers to buy sustainable cotton apparel
- Determine consumers' perceptions and current knowledge about risks and benefits of cotton usage in apparel.

## METHODS

We utilized our survey and a content analysis research comprised of comments on social media posts fitting the search term "sustainable fashion". For our content analysis we analyzed around 200 comments collected from YouTube, Reddit, Facebook, Amazon, and blog posts. In general, if customers alluded to being happy with a product or a process, we deemed that positive and if the comment had a negative viewpoint, then it was deemed negative. Neutral comments were based on a customer bringing up the topic but not offering much of an opinion for the allotted category.

When creating our survey, we were interested in determining what factors were influential to consumers' purchasing patterns of sustainable apparel. We were also trying to gauge customers' knowledge and perceptions of sustainable cotton apparel. We utilized snowball sampling to collect responses.

## BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Our research intends to investigate the misleading buying patterns that consumers exhibit in regards to sustainable apparel, specifically organic cotton. Many apparel consumers have an appreciation for environmentally friendly practices, however, they are not applying this to their apparel purchases. (Goworek, Fisher, Cooper, Woodward, & Hiller, 2012).

This problem exists due, in part, to consumers' comfortability and familiarity with fast fashion. It is trendy, affordable and familiar, however, it is an extremely harmful and unethical means of consuming clothing. If the waste from fast fashion continues to grow, the damage will be irreversible (Rathinamoorthy, 2018). With that said, this is why sustainable clothing is extremely important and needs to be adopted into the mainstream of consumerism (Binet, Coste-Manière, 2018).

Consumers have indicated that while they hypothetically favor sustainable clothing they are not willing to personally sacrifice for it, in terms of price, style, etc. (Chan and Wong, 2012). In terms of style, fashion forward shoppers may be less likely to purchase sustainable options because they are usually offered as basics or seem unfashionable (Matthews and Rothenberg, 2017). Another hindering factor is lack of awareness about the availability of sustainability apparel (Avila and Ryu, 2015). Consumers have said that they are not aware of which stores carry eco-friendly clothing and where they can find it in their stores (Galbreth and Ghosh, 2013). Better understanding which marketing methods are most effective when it comes to influencing sustainable consumer behavior will help us and future marketers in the hopes of intervening on their current purchasing inconsistencies (Gordon, Carrigan, & Hastings, 2011).

Although past literature has recognized that there is an inconsistency between consumers thoughts on sustainability and their actions, literature is lacking on what can be done to remedy this issue. It has been determined that price is of great significance to consumers' purchase behaviors, especially as it relates to decisions between organic and non-organic items, yet the specific attributes consumers are willing to pay for have not been determined (Matthews and Rothenberg, 2017). Focusing on what these attributes are and how marketers can successfully market their improvements to these areas will aid in more sustainable consumption (Oh and Abraham, 2016). In our article we plan to research what factors influence consumers purchase decisions to understand what is important to them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From our content analysis search we found that consumers overall had a positive perception of sustainability in the apparel marketplace with 52% of comments. As illustrated in Table 1, price and natural alternatives are two subjects that pop up most frequently in the data selected with 15.88% and 11.18% of comments respectively. Style, 4.71%, global sourcing, 5.88%, and social impact seemed to be of least importance to consumers, based on the content of their comments. Given that 32% of consumer comments were categorized as negative it is clear there is room for improvement in the market and not all consumer needs are being met.

In our survey, we posed the question: When you shop for apparel for yourself and/or your family, how important is \_\_\_\_\_ in your decision to buy one item vs. another? Please rank the options from 1 to 9, 1 being the most important. The options included: price, style, brand name, quality, fair trade, environmentally friendly, fabric, origins of garment production, and other. In figure 1, we found that 45% of participants indicated that price is the most important aspect of purchasing sustainable apparel. Other important considerations were style and quality of the garments.

Responses collected from participants rating their level of awareness of organic cotton and sustainable clothing options showed, in Figure 2, that majority of participants had higher knowledge of sustainable clothing options, but less awareness on organic cotton with its connection to apparel.

When asked which is more important sustainable clothing or price, 66% of respondents answered price while the other 34% answered sustainable clothing.

Table 1

Category	Count Negative	Count Positive	Count Neutral	Total Count	Total %
Social Impact	2	6	3	11	6.47%
Environmental Impact	6	3	3	13	7.65%
Labor Conditions	6	6	3	15	8.82%
Global Sourcing	1	4	5	10	5.88%
Price	10	13	4	27	15.88%
Consumer Awareness	3	12	1	16	9.41%
Natural Alternatives	4	15	0	19	11.18%
Trust	9	4	2	15	8.82%
Style	2	5	1	8	4.71%
Availability	11	2	2	15	8.82%
Other	1	18	2	21	12.35%

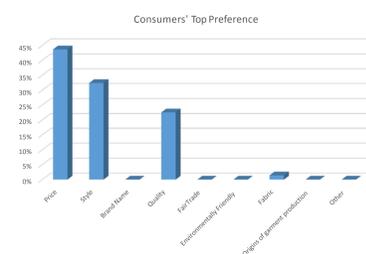


Figure 1

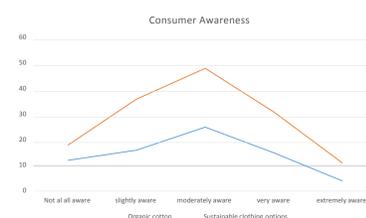


Figure 2

## SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS

Based on our knowledge from our literature search and the results of our survey, we found that price is a consistent factor that consumers always highlight when speaking about sustainable apparel. For majority of consumers, price is their first concern or consideration. We also found, which paralleled our research, that consumers have a limited understanding of sustainable cotton apparel. Limitations from our survey include a lack of demographic diversity in participants. We asked questions regarding a broad list of topics, but future studies could hone in on a couple of those and ask more specific questions

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