



From Literature Review to Conceptual Model:  
Apparel Brand's Sustainability Efforts and Consumers' Purchase Decisions

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According to the Brundtland commission, the concept of sustainability is generally defined as “being able to satisfy current needs without compromising the possibility for future generations to satisfy their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 8). This general definition points to multiple facets of sustainability. For a business to be sustainable it must embrace social equity and environmental stewardship while at the same time foster economic development (Sikdar, 2003). Engaging in sustainable business practices for some apparel businesses has entailed choosing environmentally friendly raw materials for textile products to reduce toxic waste and hence, protect the environment (Dickson et al., 2009).

Sustainability efforts are believed to impact the reputation of a business and consequently, consumer purchase decisions (Seuring & Muller, 2008). Consumers, concerned about sustainability issues, may identify with companies that market beliefs aligned with their own. The term consumer-company (C-C) identification refers to the person's perception of “oneness or belongingness” with an organization (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, p. 77). The outcomes linked to establishing and maintaining C-C identification include consumer loyalty as well as other behaviors that can provide a company with a competitive advantage. For example, Lee (2014) examined whether type of socially responsible (SR) marketing strategy employed by an apparel business influenced customer-brand (C-B) identification, brand attitude, purchase intention, and customer loyalty with adult and undergraduate apparel consumers in the U.S. Lee used customer-brand as a term rather than C-C because the stimulus described a brand. Type of SR strategy did impact participant's C-B identification and C-B identification positively influenced brand attitude, brand loyalty, and purchase intention relative to the brand.

As sustainability initiatives by apparel companies increase, our research purpose is to establish and test a conceptual model examining the effect of sustainability efforts on purchase intention. Our model proposes that sustainability efforts have indirect effects on purchase intention that are mediated by (a) customer-brand (CB) identification, (b) brand attitude, and (c) brand loyalty. (see Figure 1). We postulate that C-B identification, brand attitude, and brand loyalty mediate relationships because sustainability efforts are not simply put into place by new brands. Rather, existing brands are shifting policies (e.g., changes in minimum wages) and production. Thus, customers have some level of pre-existing knowledge and relationships with apparel brands that would shape the influence of the brand's marketing of their sustainability efforts.

To this point, this model suggests that all apparel brands are relatively similar. We know that is not the case. Apparel brands differ on a range of attributes (e.g., price, services, merchandise quality, fashionability) and have been classified according to which of these attributes are

featured (e.g., luxury, fast fashion). For example, luxury brands provide customers with rare, high quality, and perhaps timeless products, high levels of service, and an exceptional shopping experience (Fionda & Moore, 2009). Fast fashion apparel retailers provide their customers with inexpensive, disposable, and low quality products (Joy et al., 2012). Thus, it is quite feasible that the influence of sustainability effort on purchase decisions differs depending on apparel brand type. Thus, it is hypothesized that apparel brand may moderate relationships among sustainability efforts, customer- brand (CB) identification, brand attitude, brand loyalty, and purchase intention.

The proposed conceptual model in predicting the effect of brand's sustainability efforts on consumers' purchase decision provides a foundation for research and theory development. Significant findings can inform retailers' decision making in the development of effective and profitable SR strategies.

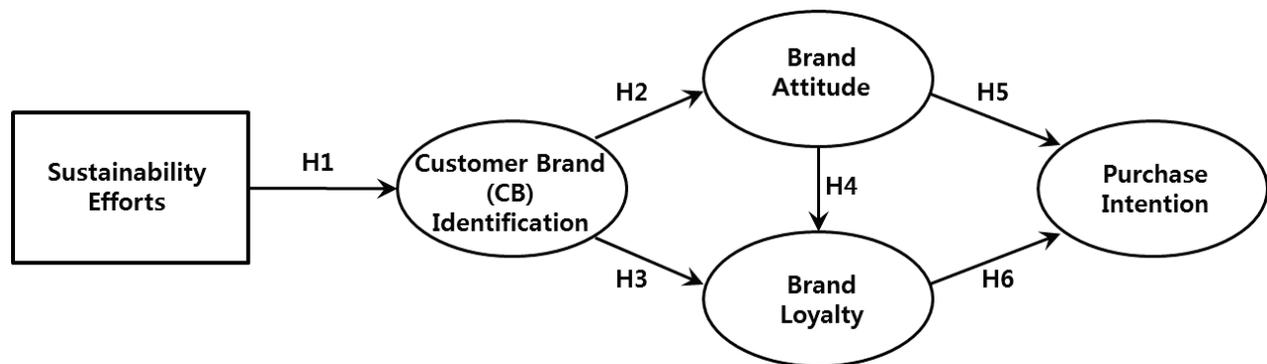


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model

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