



Generation Y's purchase intentions with organic, fair trade, and recycled apparel and their relationships to moral obligation

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The apparel industry is taking highly proactive approach to protect people and the environment followed by the upsurge of public opinions. Thus, under an umbrella movement of sustainability, efforts to improve all of three pillars – social, economic, and environmental – became “a focal point in academic and industry literature” (Lee & Hill, 2012, p. 488). Many consumers are becoming aware of apparel company’s corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities. Companies see social and environmental initiatives as a new source of business profits; therefore, a new green marketing paradigm has emerged and taken over in conventional marketing strategies.

Much research examined positive relationship between environmental concerns and socially responsible behaviors; however, little has examined the different types of CSR initiatives on consumers' purchase decision-making in relation to moral obligation. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of Generation (Gen) Y's (a) attitudes towards organic, fair trade and recycled apparel and (b) moral obligation on their purchase intentions of these products. By providing insights on Gen Y as ethical consumers, this study would help the future growth of CSR promotions in the apparel industry.

Ajzen and Fishbein’s (1980) theory of reasoned action was used as the theoretical framework of this study to understand Gen Y’s purchase intentions. This theory states that intention is determined by two variables: attitudes and subjective norms. Social norms were excluded in this study since previous research showed that there might be the lack of influence of subjective norms on purchase decision-making due to Gen Y's distinctive characteristics (Dawson, 2010). Along with the variable – purchase intention, moral obligation was included to test the directional relationship of moral values on Gen Y’s behavioral intentions.

An online survey including both open and close-ended questions was conducted with a convenience sample of 433 college students at one of the U.S. mid-western universities. The survey questionnaire consisted of demographic information as well as questions to measure the following research variables: attitude, moral obligation, and purchase intention. The example of visual labels with the definitions of organic fibers, fair trade, and recycled materials were developed and presented to the participants for providing better understanding of the CSR initiatives. The measures of these variables were adapted from previous studies and a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from “1=Strongly Disagree” to “7=Strongly Agree,” was used to measure each variable. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0 software was used to

analyze the descriptive statistics of participant's characteristics, independent samples t-test, and multiple regressions among variables.

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 33 with the mean age of 22. About 70% and 30% of the participants were females and males, respectively. The majority was White/European American (80%) followed by Asian (12%) and others (8%). An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine any significant difference between males and females in relation to their attitudes, moral obligations and purchase intentions. A statistically significant difference was found between attitudes towards the apparel labeled with organic ($t = 2.05$, $df = 408$, $p < .05$), fair trade ($t = 4.90$, $df = 199.22$, $p < .0001$), recycled ($t = 3.64$, $df = 405$, $p < .0001$) and moral obligation ($t = 2.58$, $df = 225.19$, $p < .05$). For instance, females reported significantly higher levels of attitudes towards the apparel labeled with organic, fair trade, and recycled than males. Interestingly this trend continued in females by reporting significantly higher levels of moral obligation than males. However, no significant differences towards purchase intentions of these three products were found.

Cronbach's alpha ranged from .91 to .96 for the variables including attitude, moral obligation, and purchase intention. Two regression models – classic model excluding moral obligation and extended model including moral obligation, were examined. The regression conducted to test both models, the classic and the extended, were highly significant. Between these models, the extended model ($F_{(1, 320)} = 12.61$, $p < .0001$) explained 2.5% ($p < .0001$) more variance than the classic model in predicting participants' intentions to purchase apparel labeled with organic, fair-trade and recycled.

The results of this study shows that Gen Y's attitudes towards these products are important aspects of their purchase intentions. It also suggests that Gen Y's moral obligation is a significant factor that needs to be considered by apparel industry professionals with CSR promotions when developing a new product. The findings of this study provide a foundation for future research on the relationships among attitudes, moral obligations, and intentions for ethical purchase practices among young consumers. Future study is needed to conduct with other generational cohorts to identify their relationships to moral obligation when purchasing CSR initiated products.

References

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