



Exploring the Motivations and Decision-Making of Sustainable Apparel Entrepreneurs

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According to Wackernagel et al. (2002), consumption passed the point of the earth's sustainability in 1978, and it does not appear that this trend will end anytime soon. Indeed, during 2010 alone, 13.1 million tons of textile waste was generated in the US (www.epa.gov). However, there is a growing interest in sustainability in response to the "throwaway" mentality of fast fashion consumption (Pookulangara & Shephard, 2013). Sustainability is a trend seen across industries and consumers, as more people consider the implications of their actions for the future. Although the topic of sustainability has been studied extensively, only a few studies exist which examine sustainable apparel entrepreneurs (e.g., Desai, Nassar, & Chertow, 2012; Gam, Cao, Farr, & Heine, 2009; Ho & Choi, 2012; Niinimäki & Hassi, 2011) and none that specifically examine sustainability as a key factor within their business models. In light of these gaps and the increased research interest in the topic of sustainability, the two-fold purpose of this study was to explore the motivations and decision-making of sustainable apparel entrepreneurs and to consider the role of sustainability within their business models.

To address the purpose of the study, a qualitative research design was employed. Upon IRB approval from the researchers' university, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants representing six small scale sustainable apparel companies headquartered in the Southeastern United States. Interviews were conducted at each company by one of the researchers, and were audio-recorded with participant consent. Interviews lasted from one to three hours. Questions focused on the firm's products, how it was started, what makes the firm sustainable, and what it is like to operate a sustainable apparel business. Interviews were then transcribed verbatim and cases were developed based on each of the six companies. Each case was then analyzed in comparison with the others to identify similarities and differences across the companies. An iterative process of analysis was followed, with both researchers independently reviewing the data to categorize themes and then working together to resolve category differences to organize the cohesive whole. This process culminated in an overall thematic interpretation (Spiggle, 1994).

Based on the thematic interpretation, four key drivers of motivation and decision-making shared among the participants as sustainable entrepreneurs were identified: (1) Altruism, or a focus on doing good while doing business, (2) Self-Definition, pointing to the importance of the personal values and beliefs of the entrepreneur for running a successful business, (3) Symbiosis, which emphasizes the need for alignment between these values and beliefs and the business practices of the entrepreneur, and (4) Blind Impulse, or the importance of being willing to make mistakes in building the business. Participants held similar viewpoints with regard to the importance of sustainability in terms of their motivations and how and why decisions are made.

Four key business model attributes were then defined as they emerged from the data, including: (1) Product Stewardship, (2) Value Alignment, (3) Strategic Partnerships, and (4) the

Triple Bottom Line. All of the participants spent a great deal of time and effort to design their products in a sustainable, local, and thoughtful way, taking into consideration all aspects of the design process, from sourcing to production. Participants sought out production strategies that merged the idea of fast and slow fashion business models with an alignment between quality and price. All sought out beneficial strategic partnerships as a key element of doing business, firmly keeping a focus on doing good for people and the planet, while also making a profit. Based on the findings, several recommendations for potential startups were then developed, including aligning goals, allowing for mistakes, making the most of resources, and nurturing relationships.

By examining sustainable apparel entrepreneurs, this study sheds light on a growing sector of the apparel industry, one that embraces the notion of sustainable development by encouraging a focus on the “triple bottom line” (Elkington, 1997), or the combination of economic gain with environmental and social value creation (Hockerts & Wustenhagen, 2010). Future empirical research is needed to further investigate sustainable apparel entrepreneurship from other angles, such as across cultures and from a range of different perspectives, including that of suppliers. Such research would further enrich our overall understanding of what it means to produce apparel in a sustainable fashion.

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