

Students' Attitude-Behavior Gap on Issues of Labor Exploitation

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Previous literature suggests that although consumers are educated about issues related to social responsibility, this knowledge does not necessarily influence purchase behavior (Butler & Francis, 1997; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Missing from the literature are extensive studies examining issues of social responsibility as it relates to the apparel industry, particularly with an analysis of how consumers' knowledge or attitudes of these issues ultimately influence apparel purchasing behavior. A study by Kim and Damhorst (1998) found that, despite holding attitudes of environmental concern, only a limited degree of socially responsible apparel consumption behaviors were present among apparel consumers. The present study seeks to examine further the relationship between consumers' knowledge and attitudes of labor exploitation issues in the production and distribution of apparel goods and their apparel purchasing decisions.

Participants included undergraduate students enrolled in the apparel and textiles discipline at a four-year institution located in the Midwest. An online survey was sent to all students to assess their knowledge of labor exploitation issues in apparel production. Demographic questions and items pertaining to students' apparel purchasing behavior were developed and used, including a previously tested scale designed by Dickson (1999) to assess consumers' knowledge of and concern with social issues related to the apparel industry.

A total of 78 students participated in the study. An analysis of the demographic variables revealed that a majority of the sample (87.2%) were female students. Approximately 39% of students were reportedly in their first or second years of the program, with the remaining 61% of participants reporting to be in the third, fourth, or fifth year. On average, participants reported spending a total of \$101-\$150 on new apparel purchases each month.

Among the individual items of the Knowledge of and Concern with Apparel Social Issues Scale (Dickson, 1999), an analysis of the data showed that approximately 55% of students indicated that they are knowledgeable about socially responsible clothing businesses. Another 49% of participants agreed that they are informed about issues pertaining to U.S. clothing manufacturing businesses, while 62% indicated that they are informed about issues in foreign clothing manufacturing. A majority of participants (74%) reported a concern with issues affecting workers in U.S. clothing manufacturing businesses; 83% of respondents indicated a concern with issues affecting workers in foreign clothing manufacturing businesses. Further findings on students' apparel purchasing behavior revealed 27% of participants reported previously boycotting an apparel brand or retailer because of reports that goods were produced in a sweatshop or because workers were treated unfairly, while 32% of respondents reported that a company's record on the treatment of workers influenced a prior purchasing decision. Another 36% of students reportedly have paid more for clothes and accessories that were made under fair

labor standards or in a “sweatshop free” factory. However, only 14% of students indicated actively seeking out or inquiring about conditions in which a firm’s clothes or accessories were produced prior to making a purchasing decision.

To assess the relationships among the knowledge and concern variables, a correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between students’ knowledge about socially responsible clothing businesses and their perception of being informed about issues related to U.S. clothing manufacturing businesses ($r = .583, p < .01$) and foreign clothing manufacturing firms ($r = .458, p < .01$). Additionally, a significant positive relationship existed among students who reported a concern with issues affecting workers in U.S. clothing manufacturing businesses and foreign clothing manufacturing businesses ($r = .504, p < .01$). An analysis of the behavior variables showed that students who have boycotted an apparel brand or retailer in the past because of reports that goods were produced in a sweatshop or because workers were treated unfairly were more likely to have paid more for clothes or accessories that they knew were made under fair labor standards or in a “sweatshop free” factory ($r = .415, p < .01$), to have actively sought out or inquired information in the past about the conditions in which a firm’s goods were produced ($r = .447, p < .01$), and were more influenced about a company’s record on the treatment of workers prior to making a purchasing decision ($r = .609, p < .01$). A significant positive relationship was also found between students who have paid more for fair trade goods and their involvement in seeking out information about labor conditions ($r = .372, p < .01$) and the influence of a company’s record on the treatment of workers on purchase decisions ($r = .575, p < .01$). Students more actively engaged in inquiring about labor conditions were also those more influenced by the treatment of workers in the production of goods when making purchasing decisions ($r = .527, p < .01$).

An analysis of the relationships among knowledge and concern variables and purchasing behavior variables revealed that students who have boycotted an apparel brand or retailer in the past because of reports of sweatshops or labor abuses were those that also indicated a greater concern for issues affecting U.S. clothing workers ($r = .236, p < .05$) and foreign workers ($r = .278, p < .05$). Students who indicated being informed about issues with foreign clothing manufacturers were those who were more likely in the past to boycott an apparel brand or retailer ($r = .227, p < .05$) and were more actively engaged in seeking out information about labor conditions prior to purchasing an apparel good ($r = .263, p < .05$). Students indicating a greater concern with U.S. ($r = .301, p < .01$) and foreign workers ($r = .325, p < .01$) were more influenced by a company’s record on the treatment of workers when making purchasing decisions.

After reviewing the findings, although significant positive relationships among the knowledge and concern variables with the purchasing behavior variables were observed, the relationships among these variables were not particularly strong. This indicates that a gap exists between students’ knowledge of and concern with labor exploitation issues and the impact this may have on their apparel purchasing behavior. These results support previous research suggesting that although consumers may be knowledgeable about issues of social responsibility in the apparel industry, this knowledge may not necessarily influence purchase decisions. The

implications of this are evident. First, supplying consumers information about unethical labor practices within the apparel industry may not be sufficient in modifying purchase behavior. Further, it is conceivable that until consumers demand fair labor standards, many apparel companies will continue to disregard these issues in the marketplace. Therefore, continued research is needed to explore reasons for the attitude-behavior gap in order to determine the most effective means for empowering consumers to demand corporate social responsibility.

References

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