



Identifying Environmentally Conscious Apparel Acquisition Behaviors among Eco-Conscious Consumers

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The last few years has seen significant increased mass media coverage of environmentally conscious apparel consumption. However, despite the increased attention in mass media, eco-conscious apparel acquisition remains relatively under-researched from a scientific perspective. As the vulnerability of the natural environment continues and the encouragement of sustainable consumption patterns becomes even more important, this lack of both depth and breadth in knowledge about eco-conscious apparel acquisition needs addressing.

The small body of literature related to eco-conscious apparel consumption primarily focuses on a narrow range of eco-conscious apparel acquisition behaviors including: acquiring apparel made from environmentally preferable materials (Hines & Swinker, 1996; Hustvedt, 2006; Kim & Damhorst, 1998), acquiring second-hand or classically styled apparel (Kim & Damhorst, 1998; Stephens, 1985), and avoiding apparel products for environmental reasons (Kim & Damhorst, 1998). In the design of each of these research studies, the researchers predefined what eco-conscious behaviors they focused on and did not attempt to identify additional emergent behaviors. As a result, it is possible that apparel consumers engage in other eco-conscious acquisition behaviors not considered in any of these studies. An improved understanding of the range of apparel acquisition behaviors utilized by eco-conscious consumers will add to the knowledge base of eco-conscious apparel consumption.

The overall purpose of this research study is to expand the knowledge base of eco-conscious apparel consumption by identifying specific apparel acquisition behaviors that eco-conscious consumers engage in as they aim to lower the environmental impact of their apparel consumption. The study identified eco-conscious apparel consumers to participate in the study through a purposive, criterion based sample strategy. Selection of the sample involved the administration of a recruitment questionnaire to eco-conscious individuals. The questionnaire assessed participants' engagement with different types of eco-conscious apparel acquisition behaviors. Analysis of the data from the questionnaire led to formation of the study's sample frame, from which a random selection of respondents were invited to participate further in the study. A total of 26 informants participated in the full study.

The data collection method this study employed was semi-structured interviews. In regards to this particular paper, the primary topic explored in the interviews was how the participants felt their environmental values and attitudes influenced their apparel acquisition



behaviors. In order to allow the behaviors to emerge from the data, the researcher asked open ended questions and refrained from asking leading questions that might sway responses.

Analysis of the data to answer this question utilized an intent-oriented definition of eco-conscious behaviors as opposed to an impact-oriented one. As originally proposed by Stern (2000), when eco-conscious behaviors are defined using an impact-oriented definition, the behaviors are assessed based on the actual impact the behaviors have on the environment. On the other hand, eco-conscious behaviors defined as intent-oriented are behaviors that the actor undertakes with the intention of benefiting the environment. Therefore, this study considered apparel acquisition behaviors to be eco-conscious when the participants indicated that they engaged in particular behaviors because they believed the behaviors to be environmentally beneficial. This is a justifiable decision because, according to Stern, it is the appropriate to make use of the intent-oriented definition when research, focuses on understanding and changing behaviors.

Among the research participants of this study, the most consistent eco-conscious apparel acquisition behavior was limiting the amount of apparel that the participants acquired. In fact, all of the participants stated that because of their desire to be eco-conscious apparel consumers, they controlled the quantity of clothing they acquired. To limit the quantity of apparel acquired, the research participants utilized two primary strategies: 1) acquiring apparel on a needs basis and 2) extending the initial lifetime of apparel items as long as possible to reduce the need to acquire replacement garments. To extend the lifetime of their apparel the participants spoke of taking good care of their clothes, wearing clothes until they are no longer useable, and repairing and refashioning clothes.

In addition to limiting apparel acquisition, a second eco-conscious behavior discussed by the study's participants was acquiring apparel specifically because the garments exhibit certain ecologically preferable attributes. Particularly, the participants acquired apparel because the fibers were environmentally preferable (are organic or are more sustainable in at least one aspect when compared to mainstream fibers) or the apparel had other environmentally preferable attributes such as being high quality, classically styled, or made in the United States.

The third eco-conscious apparel acquisition behavior engaged in by the research participants was their acquisition of apparel through environmentally preferable sources. The sources most commonly referenced by the participants included second hand sources, eco-conscious companies (companies that have a reputation for selling environmentally preferable apparel, conducting business in an environmentally responsible manner, and supporting environmental protection), independent companies, and home sewing.

Another eco-conscious apparel acquisition behavior discussed by the research participants was their avoidance of engaging in behaviors they perceived as not environmentally conscious. Primarily the participants avoided apparel made from certain synthetic fibers, fur, and leather, apparel acquired from certain companies, and apparel acquired through mail order.

The final eco-conscious apparel acquisition behavior discussed by some of the research participants was making personal sacrifices in order to be able to acquire environmentally preferable apparel. The sacrifices that the study's participants indicated making included



personal resources of money and time, the style of apparel acquired, the amount of apparel acquired, and the sources from which the participants acquired apparel.

The overall conclusion of this study is that consumers engage in a variety of eco-conscious apparel acquisition behaviors beyond those previously considered. For apparel consumers aiming to decrease the environmental footprint of their consumption, it is about more than acquiring apparel made from environmentally preferable fibers. Therefore, consumer education programs focusing on modifying the apparel acquisition behaviors of consumers and encouraging eco-conscious apparel consumption should education on all the possibilities for eco-conscious apparel acquisitions. Among the research participants, two of the most common behaviors are limiting their consumption of apparel and acquiring apparel through second hand sources. Because neither of these two behaviors requires increased financial resources and because second hand sources for apparel are typically readily available, these may be the most practical ways for apparel consumers to be eco-conscious. Therefore, these behaviors may also be logical ones to encourage in consumer education programs. Based on the behaviors emerging from this study, additional environmentally conscious apparel acquisition behaviors that consumer education programs could focused on include educating consumers how to identify quality or classically styled apparel products and teaching ways to refashion and update garments that are already owned by consumers.



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