

SUSTAINABLE FASHION: MEASURING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR DECISION MAKING AND CONSUMER HABITS

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable fashion is commonly perceived as an antidote to the environmental, social, and economic damages caused by fast fashion. Fast fashion relies on low prices, quick merchandise turnover, and various forms of exploitation. Alternatively, sustainable fashion leverages corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities to mitigate these damages while supporting rising trends in responsible consumerism. This study aims to determine the ease with which consumers can navigate sustainable fashion brand websites to detect CSR activities and to construct a framework that identifies CSR activities, CSR dimensions, and the business operation stages at which they occur. Altogether, this study attempts to explore the effectiveness of CSR web communication and offers decision makers a tool to implement and identify CSR activities.

Keywords: sustainable fashion, CSR, decision-making, measurement matrix

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend in responsible consumerism, which represents consumers' interests in sustainable decision-making and is not limited to a singular industry. Despite these increasing interests in responsible consumerism, there remains an attitude-behavior gap among consumers; that is, consumers indicate an interest in eco-friendly products but do not act on these interests in practice [9]. While some speculate that this attitude-behavior gap results from suspicions of greenwashing, this study posits strengthening corporate social responsibility (CSR) web communication could help create more consistent understandings of CSR activities among consumers and decision-makers, thereby improving the attitude-behavior gap. The purpose of this study is to develop a framework to support responsible decision-making among consumers and companies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there are varying definitions of CSR, it is generally accepted as a multifaceted construct through which companies "integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" [3]. Because there are so many CSR definitions, and because consumers are inundated with CSR activities, consumers may feel overwhelmed or confused. Thus, the proposed CSR framework would provide consumers with a systematic framework to learn about CSR and make well-informed decisions. CSR is a fundamental part of business operations across varying industries and has been found to contribute to a company's financial success. However, there is little guidance as to how companies can best leverage CSR activities. Chaudhri and Wang [2, p. 234] discussed the "need for transparent and proactive communication of CSR," particularly because CSR

communication is vital to sustaining stakeholder relationships. Chang and Jai [1] suggested that the increase in consumers' interests in sustainability, in combination with CSR activities, are positively linked with improved financial performance. In essence, CSR exists as an impactful tool, yet there are opportunities to make it more efficient among decision-makers in the industry. Thus, this study's framework also aims to provide companies with a guide to implement CSR activities in their business practices while helping them communicate their CSR practices more effectively online.

METHOD

A preliminary framework was developed based on literature reviews and consisted of three elements: (a) Y-axis, the five CSR dimensions; (b) X-axis, the business operation stages at which they occur; and (c) content, CSR activities used by sustainable fashion brands. A qualitative method, content analysis, was employed to examine CSR activities on sustainable brands' websites and refine the framework. In total, 27 U.S.-based sustainable fashion brands from the Sustainable Apparel Coalition's list of Brand & Retailers members were used. Their websites were independently analyzed by two researchers to identify CSR activities. The CSR activities were entered into a coding sheet, and an intercoder reliability rate (IRR) was calculated for each brand.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of a word frequency count from the text analysis revealed the most commonly used themes in CSR definitions as well as ways in which definitions have evolved through time. Five CSR dimensions were established for the X-axis of the framework: environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and legal. Different from the finding of a previous study [4], the legal dimension emerged instead of "voluntary." It exists to help consumers and decision-makers discern legal obligations from voluntary actions. Through this study, the researchers learned that most sustainable fashion brands' websites lack the structure and organization needed to better present their CSR activities to consumers from the website content analysis. Without proper structure, consumers can miss out on important information that could otherwise increase consumer knowledge and boost the brand's return on CSR investments. Thus, it is necessary to clearly present CSR activities on company websites. The CSR framework proposed by this study can help determine the CSR activities, CSR dimensions, and the business operation stages at which they occur. In addition, the framework can help consumers to better understand CSR practices and make their purchase decisions. For future study, perhaps, some common terms should be developed and used across the industry to provide a clear and consistent understanding for consumers.

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