

Sustainability for Sale: Examining the Alignment of Retailer Sustainability Websites with Consumer Priorities

Jacy White
jacywhit@ttu.edu
210-393-1219

Hannah Gustin
hgustin@ttu.edu
281-923-7356

Laura Fischer
laura.fischer@ttu.edu
804-761-6754

Sustainability for Sale: Examining the Alignment of Retailer Sustainability Websites with Consumer Priorities

Introduction

Consumers are becoming increasingly environmentally conscious, bringing a rise in demand for sustainably produced products, including cotton (Pranta et al., 2024). There is a relationship between sustainability information and consumers' purchase intent, suggesting higher amounts of positive and clear information are associated with greater purchase intent (Chi et al. 2019; O'Rourke & Ringer, 2016). Brands seeking to align with consumers' values must learn to communicate their sustainability efforts to consumers in a way that is both easily accessible and engaging. In the context of cotton, clear communication of sustainability claims can translate into behavior change (Lertkulprayad & Moudsong, 2024) that is relevant beyond just individual purchases. More consumers choosing sustainably produced cotton could create a market in which better practices are encouraged for farmers and brands, as well. This study focuses how cotton sustainability is displayed on retailers' websites, specifically how messaging aligns with consumer priorities.

Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy theory explains how organizations align their actions and consumer-facing communications with social norms to maintain support (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Legitimacy is achieved when the organization's behaviors are perceived as congruent with what society deems appropriate. Suchman (1995) further refined legitimacy, defining it as a general perception that the actions of the organization are desirable and align with a socially constructed system of values. In agricultural fields, legitimacy is especially important, as there is heightened public scrutiny regarding production practices and environmental impacts (Lampridi et al., 2019; Sanchez-Bravo et al., 2021). The results of this research (Lampridi et al., 2019; Sanchez-Bravo et al., 2021) suggest sustainability communication serves not only as information dissemination but as a legitimacy-seeking strategy, making legitimacy theory an appropriate lens for examining why retailers present sustainable cotton initiatives the way they do.

Purpose & Objective

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent of which this communication aligns with existing consumer priorities. The research objective was as follows:

RO1: Identify the presence of consumer priorities (e.g. price, comfort, quality, and functionality) in cotton retailers' sustainability website communication.

Methodology

Content analysis was used to analyze 21 retailer websites, selected due to their affiliation with the U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol (USCTP) and the USCTP's position as one of the leading cotton sustainability initiatives (U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol, 2024). Each retailers' sustainability webpage was analyzed for both the presence or absence of consumer priorities including price, comfort, quality, and functionality (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Schiaroli et al., 2024). To assess intercoder reliability, two coders independently coded all 21 sustainability webpages for the presence or absence of each consumer priority. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Deen Freelon's ReCal2: Reliability for 2 Coders (Freelon, 2010). Cohen's kappa was used to

determine reliability because it is considered the most strict and informative measure (Reisner, 2023). Cohen's kappa (k) surpassed .89 for each variable.

Results

The research objective examined the extent to which retailers' sustainability website messaging aligns with consumer priorities related to sustainable cotton products, including price, comfort, functionality, and quality. Calculation of the frequency of the four priorities across the 21 websites revealed alignment with each priority was uneven. Price and comfort were each only referenced on 1 website (4.8%). Functionality was discussed on 2 websites (9.5%). Quality was the most frequently referenced priority, appearing on 7 of the 21 websites (33.3%). To further explain the general presence of consumer priorities in retailers' sustainability communication, the total number of priorities references on each website was calculated. Across the 21 retailer websites analyzed, the majority ($f = 15$, 71.4%) did not reference any of the examined consumer priorities. Only one website (4.8%) mentioned all four of the consumer priorities.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Results indicated that the presence of consumer priorities on these websites is limited, and most of the observed retailers did not reference any of the evaluated priorities. The high percentage of websites that did not address any of the examined priorities suggest sustainability is being communicated through terms that are not conducive to the attributes consumers commonly use to evaluate their products. This pattern highlights a disconnect between established consumer decision-making factors (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Schiaroli et al., 2024) and the information retailers choose to emphasize when presenting their sustainable cotton. While the presence of some priorities suggests consumer awareness among a small percentage of retailers, the overall lack of priority integration points to inconsistency in how consumer-facing sustainability messaging is positioned. The findings are consistent with legitimacy theory. Retailers are attempting to use sustainability messaging as a method of demonstrating alignment with social expectations, rather than to fully engage with consumer priorities. These results support prior research suggesting sustainability communication in agriculture, specifically the food sector, often serves as a tool for perceived legitimacy instead of as a comprehensive presentation of information (Lampridi et al., 2019; Sanchez-Bravo et al., 2021). This approach may succeed in establishing some legitimacy but may fail at fostering meaningful consumer understanding.

To integrate consumer priorities more consistently, retailers, agricultural communicators, Extension, and others should incorporate discussion of price, comfort, quality, and functionality relative to sustainable cotton across all sustainability communication to enhance the relevance of the messaging to their consumers. Broadly, messaging should aim to balance both legitimacy and consumer engagement. These industry professionals could strengthen their legitimacy and trust from consumers by including more specific practices, sourcing details, and proof of product benefits in their sustainability messaging. Integrating more details regarding consumer priorities does not require agriculturalists to abandon environmentally focused messaging altogether, but rather translating sustainability efforts into a language consumers already use to evaluate sustainable cotton products. Future research examining consumer priorities should be explored. Beyond price, comfort, quality, and functionality, research should investigate what other factors influence sustainable cotton purchasing decisions to determine if messaging aligns with a broader set of consumer priorities.

References

- Chi, T., Gerard, J., Dephillips, A., Liu, H., & Sun, J. (2019). Why U.S. consumers buy sustainable cotton made collegiate apparel? A study of the key determinants. *Sustainability*, *11*(11), 3126. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11113126>
- Dowling, J. & Pfeffer, J. (1975). Organizational legitimacy: Social values and organizational behavior. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, *18*(1), 122-136. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1388226>
- Freelon, D. (2010). *ReCal2: Reliability for 2 Coders*. Deen Freelon. <https://dfreelon.org/utis/recalfront/recal2/>
- Lampridi, M. G., Sorenson, C. G., & Bochtis, D. (2019). Agricultural sustainability: A review of concepts and methods. *Sustainability*, *11*(18), 5120. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11185120>
- Lertkulprayad, L. & Moudsong, P. (2024). Factors influencing purchasing behavior of sustainable fashion products from organic cotton among working-age consumers in Thailand. *Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Science*, *22*(2). <https://doi.org/10.57239/PJLSS-2024-22.2.00807>
- O'Rourke, D., & Ringer, A. (2016). The impact of sustainability information on consumer decision making. *Journal of Industrial Ecology*, *20*(4), 882–892. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jiec.12310>
- Pranta, A. D., Rahaman, T., Repon, R., & Shikder, A. A. R. (2024). Environmentally sustainable apparel merchandising of recycled cotton-polyester blended garments: Analysis of consumer preferences and purchasing behaviors. *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, *10*(3). 100357. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joitmc.2024.100357>
- Reisner, A. (2023). *Reading social science methods*. Windsor & Downs Press. <https://doi.org/10.21900/wd.18>
- Ribeiro, P. R., Batista, P., Mendes-Palma, F., Pintado, M., & Oliveira-Silva, P. (2023). Consumers' engagement and perspectives on sustainable textile consumption. *Sustainability*, *15*(22), 15812. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152215812>
- Sanchez-Bravo, P., Chambers V, E., Noquera-Artiaga, L., Sendra, E., Chambers IV, E., & Carbonell-Barrachina, A. A. (2021). Consumer understanding of sustainability concept in agricultural products. *Food Quality and Preference*, *89*, 104136. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodqual.2020.104136>
- Schiaroli, V., Fraccascia, L., & Dangelico, R. M. (2024). How can consumers behave sustainably in the fashion industry? A systematic literature review of determinants, drivers, and barriers across the consumption phases. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, *483*(10), 144232. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2024.144232>
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *The Academy of Management Review*, *20*(3), 571-610. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258788>
- U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol. (2024). *Trust in a Smarter Cotton Future*. U.S. Cotton Trust Protocol. <https://trustuscotton.org/>