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Experimenting and Evaluating Sustainable Fashion Label System Prototype

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Abstract

The fashion industry is the third most polluting industry (Howell, 2020) following fuel and agriculture. It creates 10% of humanity's carbon emissions (Fleischamann, 2019). The production and consumption of fashion products cause an irreversible negative impact on humans, animals, and the environment. There have been several studies, projects, and initiations aiming to increase the sustainability of the fashion industry. But the consumers' sustainable behavior about purchase and consumption is still not satisfactory (Vehmas et al.,2017; Kong et al., 2016; Kong and Ko, 2017).

Two main factors avoiding consumers' ability to act on their favorable attitudes are (1) lack of awareness and (2) lack of credible information and communication (James and Montgomery, 2017; Peirson-Smith and Evans, 2017). In other words, fashion consumers either lack awareness about sustainable products or have awareness but cannot reach information easily and digest the attained information. For example, fashion brands create their labels in parallel with their product lines including concepts and procedures such as organic, ecological, sustainable, or ethical. Nevertheless, they do not clearly explain their intention and they do not measure the impact of these practices. They barely provide how and where their sustainable goods are produced, which sustainable procedures are followed, and what impact they created on human and animal life and the environment.

On the other hand, there are trustable certifications measuring fashion products' sustainability based on their determined criteria such as OekoTex, Fair Trade, Certified B Corp, PETA, and more. However, some of them are perceived to be too technical and complicated for fashion consumers (Koszweska, 2011). These measures are not easily digested by the consumer. Moreover, terms and procedures are also unfamiliar to the consumer as well as other stakeholders of the fashion system (Thomas, 2008). For example, the consumer does not know what upcycling, downcycling, and recycling referring yet certifications, brands and experts use such terms to define sustainable products. All these confusing or technical sources of information cause frustration and avoid inclining of sustainable purchase and consumption (Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018).

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The literature and preliminary findings of this research document that if sustainability awareness and sustainability literacy of information sources are increased, fashion consumer can alter their behaviors in more sustainable directions. To be able to increase these two, literature and our preliminary findings led us to the lack of an attention-grabbing, and easy-to-understand tool providing a mediating role. Therefore, this research aims to explore characteristics of a label system to communicate five sustainability criteria of a fashion product to increase sustainability awareness and literacy of fashion consumers. These criteria are (1) material, raw material, and procedure, (2) environmental impact, (3) social and ethical welfare, (4) animal welfare (5) post-purchase and product care. In this way, it is expected to assist sustainable behavior regarding the purchase, and consumption of fashion consumers by filling the gap to give sustainability information of a fashion product.

By the time this abstract is submitted, the literature review, three exploratory focus group sessions (as the first set), a participatory design workshop in Global Fashion Conference 2020 (GFC2020), an online survey, and three sessions of the second focus group set are completed. Based on what literature indicated as previously highlighted, we conducted three focus group sessions and discovered that (1) fashion consumer has knowledge gap about sustainability. (2) There are transparency, trust, and literacy problems in fashion. (3) Different levels and types of information are required for different consumer segments. (4) A tool to increase awareness and behavior is needed. In the second round of literature review, we listed existing certifications, labels, terms and five criteria that fashion consumer expects to know about the sustainability of a fashion product. With these findings, we conducted a conference workshop at GFC2020 to evaluate the idea. The result of this workshop motivated us to focus on what consumers need and how to develop the label. Then, we finished the second set of focus groups and collected feedback and information to design a prototype of the label. With all focus group findings, four user personas are defined. These personas represent four diversified fashion consumer segments which are (1) people who know about sustainable fashion but feels confused about what they know, (2) people who are skeptical and cynical about sustainable fashion, (3) people who are romantically positive about sustainable fashion and (4) people who are a more selfish and pragmatic therefore prior themselves over sustainable fashion consumption.

As the next step, these personas are planned to be used in a participatory design session for prototype design of label. Designers, consumers, policymakers, brand executives, and researchers are planned to be invited to this session.

Before Global Fashion Conference 2021 is held, we will have the prototype design responding to the needs of four personas. In the GFC2021 workshop, we plan to exhibit the prototypes to the conference audience for testing and evaluation. The workshop methodology will use participatory design approaches with vignettes, and prototype testing methods. The participants will be given four vignettes that will be written after prototypes are completed. These vignettes will be telling different

scenarios involving the usage of label prototypes. Through these vignettes, participants will be able to take a role in different scenarios. In this way, they will be able to interact, use, and experience the label prototypes. In the end, they will be asked to comment and critique the prototypes.

Expected results of the workshop are a source of information to be worked on by designers for the second iteration of prototypes and user as well as expert feedback that will be used on developing the final label design.

Keywords: sustainability, fashion communication, labelling, participatory design workshop, vignette, persona, segmentation

Experimenting and Evaluating Sustainable Fashion Label System Prototype

Project Info

This project is part of four years Ph.D. research study conducted by Gül Kaner under the supervision of Dr. Lemi Baruh in the Design, Technology and Society Programme at Koç University, Istanbul Turkey. The overall project aims to increase the sustainability awareness and literacy of fashion consumers. In so doing it aims to explore characteristics of a label system to communicate the sustainability of a fashion product. In this way, it is expected to assist sustainable behavior of fashion consumers regarding the purchase, and consumption of fashion products. The used methods cover several procedures and tools such as literature review, focus group, expert interview, online survey, vignettes, shopping activities, role-playing, and participatory design workshops. Based on the findings of these methods, at the current state of the project, five sustainability criteria of fashion products which are(1) Material, Raw material, and Procedure (2) Environmental Impact, (3) Social & ethical welfare, (4) Animal welfare, (5) Post-purchase and product care and four personas (romantic optimists, egocentrics, confused alecs, gloomies) to be addressed for the communication of sustainable fashion products are developed.

This conference workshop, on the other hand, aims at the experimentation and evaluation of sustainable label prototypes which are the outcome of participatory design workshops conducted with experts and fashion consumers before the conference workshop. The participatory design workshop outcome documents characteristics and prototypes of the label systems providing information to increase sustainability literacy and awareness of average fashion consumers by using five criteria addressing four personas. The previous findings of this project will be experimented with and evaluated in GFC 2021 workshop. After the conference workshop is completed the overall findings will be utilized to finalize the label system prototype. Hopefully, this project will be used by the stakeholders of the fashion system for developing communication and marketing strategies as well as informatory tools to increase sustainability literacy, awareness, and sustainable behavior of fashion consumers.

Project Background

Fashion is a system of institutions consisting of diversified stakeholders such as designers, engineers, editors, factory workers, researchers, consumers, and more (Kawamura, 2018). This system of institutions has recently grown into the third most polluting industry (Howell, 2020) following fuel and agriculture. Fashion production consists of 10% of humanity's carbon emissions (Fleischamann, 2019). Globally, 92 million of tones textile is wasted every year; 85% of them end up in landfills as textile waste (Beall, 2020). Fashion's negative impact does not only influence the environment but also the

institutions of its system. In an industry that values 406 billion million dollars, only 2,5% percent of the price of a fast-fashion product goes to the factory worker. This costs approximately 0,12 cents of a 5 euro t-shirt (Schulze and Banz, 2015). During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the wages of workers in the fashion industry decreased by 21% while the most profitable 20 fashion brands grew 11% (Cline, 2020). As these numbers and facts show us, behind the glamorous fashion products that are pictured in Vogue magazine's pages, an irreversible footprint exists. Therefore, a more sustainable fashion system is imperative.

Sustainability is an umbrella term (Thomas, 2008) defined first time as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In a fashion context, it can be perceived as neutralizing the impact or giving back as much as or more than consumed. Fashion studies' literature and other relevant fields studied diversified aspects on increasing sustainability in the fashion system. These aspects cover sustainable design and production methods (Lawless and Medvedev, 2015; Lewis et al. 2016) construction of sustainable education approaches (Park, 2018; DeLong et al, 2016; Raebild and Hasling, 2019), campaigns and projects conducted by brands (Jang, 2012; Kim and Ma, 2014, Kim et al 2018) and understanding fashion consumer behavior (Sadachar et al., 2016; Kong et al. 2015; Kong and Ko, 2017). Research on fashion consumers documents an attitude-behavior gap about sustainable products. They highlight that fashion consumers are highly positive about sustainable products, but they don't purchase them. (Vehmas et al.,2017; Kong et al., 2016; Kong and Ko, 2017). Reasons such as price, design, and accessibility prevent fashion consumers from altering their choices to more sustainable options (Tey et al., 2018). There are also psychological reasons influencing buying decisions according to the personality of fashion consumers. These reasons can be their beliefs, social environment (Kong et al. 2015), consideration of future consequences (Strathman et al, 1994), and their level of fashion consciousness (Gould and Stern, 1989). For example, the social environment or level of thinking less about future outcomes of behavior may reduce sustainable behavior. People who have a lower concern about the long-term influence of their behavior may be less motivated about environmentally responsible action. Moreover, two main factors that reduce consumers' ability to act on their favorable attitudes are (1) lack of awareness (ref) and (2) lack of credible information and communication (Reimers et al., 2016; Peirson-Smith and Evans, 2017; Evans and Peirson-Smith, 2018; James and Montgomery, 2017). In other words, fashion consumers either lack awareness about sustainable products or has awareness but cannot reach information easily and comprehend it. For this reason, this project firstly focuses on (1) increasing sustainability awareness of fashion consumers. Second, it focuses on (2) increasing sustainability literacy of fashion consumer who has awareness yet does not have access to credible information.

The literature covers several studies about the type of information and sources of information to educate fashion consumers. These types and sources are knowledge about product (Han and Steel, 2015), knowledge of environmental issues (Sadachar et al., 2016), knowledge sources as education, personal connections, and corporate communication (Kong et al., 2016). On the other hand, label systems are another significant source of information about the sustainability details of fashion products. There are trustable certifications labeling fashion products based on their determined criteria such as OekoTex, Fair Trade, Certified B Corp, PETA, and more. However, some of them are perceived to be too technical and complicated for fashion consumers (Koszweska, 2011, Peirson-Smith, A. and Evans 2018). Moreover, brands create their own labels in parallel with their product lines including concepts and procedures such as organic, ecological, sustainable, or ethical. Nevertheless, they do not clearly explain the intention and impact of these labels. Join Life label of ZARA, Conscious Collection of H&M, C&A and Mango are examples of these labels and product lines. But they barely provide how and where their sustainable goods are produced, which sustainable procedures are followed, and what impact they created on human and animal life and the environment. Ambiguous messages and labels mislead the consumer and decrease the credibility of these labels. So, it ends up as greenwashing (Parguel et al., 2015). Regarding this, "harmonization of the existing systems, and a new approach to consumer education and information involving the labels" (Koszweska, 2011; Henninger, 2015) is essential.

The literature and our preliminary findings collected during focus group sessions document that if sustainability awareness and sustainability literacy of information sources (i.e. labels, certifications, and other sources) are increased, fashion consumer can alter their behaviors. To be able to increase these two, literature and our preliminary findings led us to the lack of an attention-grabbing, and easy-to-understand tool providing sustainability information of a fashion product.

Project Phases, Activities & Methodology

The first phase of the project began with a literature review covering the fashion studies as well as other relevant fields such as design, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, media, marketing, and communication. The following keywords, theories, and concepts have been investigated in journals, conference proceedings, books, book chapters, and company reports: *Sustainability, ecological, ethical, green, sustainability literacy, fashion thinking, sustainability awareness, different forms of knowledge label systems, the theory of planned behavior, fashion consciousness, consideration of future consequences, nudge, cognitive dissonance, qualitative research methods, participatory design, vignette, co-design, quantitative research methods, greenwashing.*

The outcome of the first phase documented a significant gap to focus on. Fashion consumers have diversified levels of awareness, knowledge, behavior, and information sources about sustainable

products and behaviors. However, the current status of sustainability awareness and behavior is not considered satisfactory by many researchers. This gap motivated us to discover relevant information, content and what consumer requires from existing certifications and labels can be used by a mediator system to be easily reached and digested by fashion consumer.

The second phase continued with a set of focus group sessions. Three exploratory focus group sessions with 6 people in each were conducted to understand the approach of fashion consumers to sustainability, consumption, and usage of sustainable fashion products, type of information, and content they need to increase their awareness and literacy. Participants' self-reported knowledge of sustainability in fashion was low. Likewise, participants indicated that sustainability was typically not a criterion that they actively employed while shopping for fashion products. At the beginning of the session, participants were given a virtual shopping task with images from the online store of H&M, a multinational clothing retail company. Participants were asked to choose a full outfit for themselves with no budget limit. The online products shown to the participants had no tags as well as products with tags of "Conscious" referring to H&M's sustainable product line, "Premium Quality" referring to higher quality and relatively more expensive product line, and tags signaling other special collections sold on the website. Following the task, the focus group started with a discussion regarding the choices they made. Then, the participants were invited to discuss questions related to their perceptions (e.g., concerns, prejudices, expectations, what makes an object or a process sustainable) about and behaviors related to sustainable fashion. Further questions iteratively changed after every session. Each meeting took approximately 2-2,5 hours. The meetings were voice-recorded. The recordings were firstly deductively coded (Miles et al., 2014) which refers to the presumed results consisting of the focus group program flow. Based on responses to certain questions (i.e., what sustainability refers to), answers were grouped and analyzed under these predefined themes. Certain themes unexpectedly emerged from responses (i.e., types and sources of credible info). These findings were inductively coded (Miles et al., 2014) and thematically analyzed based on the patterns of the answers.

Focus group sessions document the following results. Fashion consumer has knowledge gap about sustainability. There are transparency, trust, and literacy problems in fashion. They feel unsatisfied about access to existing products, access to information, and their level of literacy. They state they need credible information but are not as certain about the level and type of information. Different levels and types of information are required. Participants need credible sources of information. A tool to increase awareness and behavior is needed.

Moreover, five criteria emerged in their responses which can be categories to focus on while developing the label system. These criteria are as follows; (1) Material, Raw material, and Procedure (2) Environmental Impact, (3) Human welfare, (4) Animal welfare, (5) Post-purchase and product care.

The third phase was an online participatory design workshop conducted as a part of the Global Fashion Conference 2020 in Lyon. The conference participants (i.e. researchers, academicians, and private sector professionals) evaluated the findings of focus groups. Five participants were given an Excel chart including five pre-determined criteria of a fashion product with certifications, labels, concepts, and keywords. They were asked to relate five criteria to these certifications, labels, concepts, and keywords individually. Afterward, they repeated this activity collectively and evaluated the label idea and pre-determined criteria.

The idea of developing a label system and five pre-determined criteria were evaluated as suitable to focus on this research. Participants advised focusing on the characteristics of the label system rather than the organization of existing sources of information, terms, and criteria. In addition to literature and focus group findings, they also recommended developing a simple-to-understand and attention-grabbing label system.

In the fourth phase of the project based on the feedback of the conference workshop, the second set of focus group sessions was conducted for a deeper investigation of five criteria and the demand for further informational needs. Participants' self-reported knowledge of sustainability was the same as in the previous set. Three sessions were conducted with six participants from Turkey, aged between 26-42. These sessions were done online due to Covid-19 lockdowns. In this set, we used vignettes because we needed to capture significant moments (Miles et al, 2014) and observe participants' experiences and reactions when they possibly meet these criteria. Participants were given six vignettes before the meeting. They were asked to share what they would do if they had experienced a situation in the vignette. Vignettes summarized stories of fictional characters who needed to make decisions while making a fashion-related purchase or decide on the use of a sustainable (vs. not as sustainable) fashion product based on five criteria as well as price and design. After making their decisions individually, the participants were invited to discuss the options in the vignettes collectively. As in the first set of focus groups, participants continued with a discussion of their general perceptions and behavior about sustainable fashion. Meetings took approximately 2-2,5 hours. They were video-recorded. Coding was done like in the first set as deductively and then inductively (Miles et al., 2014). Most responses were aligned with the first set of the focus group. The participants agreed on the criteria and mentioned that these criteria should be considered holistically. When any criterion is too weak compared to others, this weak criterion makes them think skeptical about the sustainability competence of this fashion product. So, it prevents them from purchasing the product. Moreover, when the results of the first and the second set of the focus groups have been analyzed a saturation and pattern observed in the responses of the participants. Based on the coding and analysis of the findings, four related but distinct consumer personas pertaining to informational needs, motivation to increase sustainability literacy, and sustainability-related behavior in fashion emerged. These

personas, which will be described below, are romantic optimists, egocentrics, confused alecs, gloomies.

1-romantic optimists: people who have a more positive opinion about the future and believe that even small actions can change.

2-egocentrics are those who consider sustainable behavior only if they can provide a material benefit to themselves.

3-confused alecks has the highest awareness and literacy about sustainable fashion but with this, they feel illiterate to existing information, data, and resources.

4-gloomies: are the ones who are suspicious about making a change as individuals and have high trust issues with brands.

The fifth phase consists of participatory design workshops with experts and a consumer aiming to brainstorm, and conceptual design of the label system. Participatory design is specifically chosen due to its fruitful methods and tools democratizing participants and enabling information collection. PD aims to provide an opportunity to involve stakeholders who are influenced directly and indirectly by the design (Halskov and Hansen, 2014). In other words, not only the designer but other stakeholders such as consumers/users, policymakers, corporate people, retailers, and more will collaborate to design the label system. Therefore, participatory design approaches are preferred to develop the label system and define its characteristics. In these workshop sessions, four different groups will be given brief about each persona and the participants will practice defining characteristics, environment, system, an extension of the label addressing to these personas by containing five criteria.

By the time this paper is submitted, the outcome is in the progress of analysis therefore it will be added along with the conference workshop results.

Workshop Details

In the GFC2021 the workshop methodology uses participatory design approaches with vignettes, and prototype testing methods. The participants are given four vignettes (Appendix) that are written after prototypes are completed. These vignettes will be telling different scenarios involving the usage of label prototypes. Through these vignettes, participants will be able to take a role (Hannington & Marting, 2012) in the story told. In this way, they will be able to interact, use, and experience the label prototypes. In the end, they will be asked to comment and critique the prototypes.

Expected results of the workshop are a source of information to be worked on by designers for the second iteration of prototypes and user as well as expert feedback that will be used on developing the final label design.

Findings of The Workshop

Findings will be added once the workshop is conducted within the framework of Global Fashion Conference 2021, Warsaw Poland.

Conclusion & Implications

This workshop aims at the experimentation and evaluation of existing findings of the participatory design workshops which document the characteristics and the prototype of the sustainable label system developed to increase sustainability literacy and awareness of personas by communicating five criteria. The GFC workshop results will be added after it is carried out. Future work of the project focus on finalizing the prototype design of the label system. Overall, this project constitutes a source of information to be used for the development of communication and marketing strategies of sustainable fashion products as well as guidance for the design of tools providing sustainability information of fashion products. With this source of information hopefully, it may be possible to increase sustainability awareness and literacy to assist their sustainable behavior.

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APPENDIX

- Vignette 1 – Egocentrics

Peter is a 29 years old engineer and a semi-professional basketball player. He cares about his health and makes effort to eat organic food, tries not to consume sugar, and follows a ketogenic diet. He is also socially active. He has many friends and sometimes he performs as an amateur DJ at the parties his friends hold. He recently realized that his social circle is making effort to prefer ethical products in their fashion choices. They try to buy local products or independent brands but not fast fashion. However, Peter mostly buys his clothes from fast-fashion brands such as Zara and H&M. Because they are more affordable, so he can buy more options. But, when he hangs out with his friends he has recently felt like they criticized him. When he went shopping at Zara, he realized a label (will be provided) providing sustainability details of the trouser he looked at. He saw five criteria, he never thought that a fashion product could be related to. Please put yourself in Peter's position concerning his shopping motivation and interact with this label and the criteria on it.

- Vignette 2 – Confused Alec

Taylor is a 33 years old scriptwriter, living with two dogs. She is sensitive about social, ethical, and environmental matters. Especially animal welfare is a priority for her. She tried to be a vegan for a year but then she quit. Because she didn't feel ready enough for it yet. So, she postponed this decision. But still, she tries not to buy animal products such as leather, wool, cashmere and prefers cosmetics that are vegan and not tested on animals. This fall, she realized that her favourite black sweater was worn off and she needed a new one. She went to a local store in a popular neighbourhood in her town to buy a new one. She liked two models. One of them was made of organic cotton but the other one was made of wool. Both of them were at the same price and matching to the style she was looking for. She knows she doesn't want to buy animal-based products, but she also heard before that organic cotton consumes too much water and harms the habitat of animals so both options were confusing. When she looked at the sustainability details on these sweaters she saw a label with five criteria (will be provided). Please put yourself in Taylor's position and use this label for your decision. Vignette

- Vignette 3 – Gloomies

Marc is a 40 years old project manager working at his own agency. Owning his own company and working with many clients made him a sceptical person. On one hand, he approaches kindly and thoughtfully his employees, colleagues, and friends. On the other hand, he experiences some trust issues with his clients based on the conflicts he faces. The same thing influences his decisions on other aspects of his life. For example, he doesn't trust big corporations and doesn't find them credible. While he wishes for better conditions for human-being, animal-being, and the environment, he also thinks

that it's not easy to have them. On a day that he has to shop for new clothes to wear at work, a label (will be provided) attached to a product catches his eyes. The label documents five criteria concerning the sustainability of this fashion product. Please put yourself in Marc's position and interact with this label concerning your shopping behaviour.

- Vignette 4 – Romantic Optimists

Mira is a 42-year-old architect. She loves to travel and discover new places, tastes and listen to the stories of new people. She follows travel and gourmet accounts on social media and tries places that these accounts share. On one of her trips, while she was shopping from a local design store, she saw a label attached on clothes to provide details about five sustainability criteria (will be provided). Please put yourself in Mira's position and interact with this label regarding your shopping experience.