

Sustainable entrepreneurship in the apparel industry: Passion and challenges

By: [Jin Su](#), [Anne Mitchell Wood](#), and [Vidyaranya B. Gargeya](#)

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Abstract:

Guided by the Triple Bottom Line theory, this study aims to acquire a deeper understanding of the passion and challenges that entrepreneurs face in developing their sustainable apparel businesses. Qualitative data were collected *via* personal interviews with the research goal of giving a thematic description of the experience of sustainable apparel entrepreneurs. Purposive sampling was used to select five sustainable apparel entrepreneurs in the Southeastern U.S. Four themes emerged related to entrepreneurial passion, including passion for what the entrepreneurs are making/selling – sustainable apparel products, passion for a sustainable future for the planet and people, passion for building a strong local community, and passion for changing the apparel industry. Three themes emerged concerning the challenges facing the sustainable apparel entrepreneurs, including limited options, price considerations, and the need to change the consumer's mindset. The study expands the existing apparel literature by examining sustainable apparel business from an entrepreneurship perspective.

Keywords: sustainability | apparel | entrepreneur | sustainable entrepreneurship | passion | small business

Article:

1. Introduction

The apparel industry is a major economic contributor to the global economy and is an ideal exemplifier of a global supply chain (Su, 2013). Due to the scale of environmental and social impacts from global apparel production and consumption, the contemporary apparel industry has a tremendous impact on the global environment and society (Heinze, 2020; Lawless & Medvedev, 2016). In recent years, sustainability (in the form of the Triple Bottom Line, also known as TBL) has received increasing attention in the apparel industry and the research community. Management literature indicates that sustainability research has been primarily studied with organizations in general or has mainly been on large companies, neglecting the fact

that small firms and large firms differ substantially in their business operations (Theyel & Hofmann, 2012). Sustainability research from the perspective of small apparel businesses is missing in the literature. This gap is especially important because most firms in the U.S. apparel industry are small- and medium-sized enterprises. Over 96.3 percent of the firms in the U.S. apparel industry in 2017 are classified as small firms with employment sizes of fewer than 100 employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Gobagoba and Littrell (2003) recommended analyzing motivations for apparel business start-ups as a way of understanding the goals that apparel entrepreneurs set for their small businesses and the criteria they use to evaluate their business performance. Recently, sustainable entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the most exciting and innovative phenomena in the global apparel industry, as evidenced by the surge of entrepreneurial solutions to environmental and social problems. The regular factors of entrepreneurial motivation cannot accurately explain the motivational structure of sustainable entrepreneurship because the main driver for sustainable entrepreneurs is strongly structured along with sustainability. Furthermore, entrepreneurial passion, a particular motivation, is considered at the heart of entrepreneurship and has been found to provide a convincing explanation about sustainable entrepreneurs' perseverance in the face of risks and barriers (Murnieks et al., 2014).

Despite the growing interest in sustainable apparel from small business owners, extant research has failed to investigate sustainable entrepreneurship in the apparel industry. Apparel entrepreneurs' motivations in developing their sustainable apparel business, particularly their entrepreneurial passion, have been unexplored. In addition, evidence on the challenges they face in their sustainable apparel business journey is lacking. Utilizing sustainability theories and implementing a qualitative research approach, this study is an effort to fill the gap by investigating sustainability from the apparel entrepreneur's perspective, specifically by empirically addressing the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are sustainable apparel entrepreneurs passionate about in starting and running their sustainable apparel businesses?

RQ2: What challenges do sustainable apparel entrepreneurs experience in their sustainable clothing businesses?

2. The review of literature

2.1. Sustainable entrepreneurship and the triple bottom line (TBL)

There is a general consensus on the three main dimensions of sustainability, namely People, Planet, and Profit or the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Elkington, 1994; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020). Drawing on TBL models, Tilley and Young (2006) defined the sustainable entrepreneur as the individual "who holistically integrates the goals of economic, social, and environmental entrepreneurship into an organization that is sustainable in its goal and sustainable in its form of wealth generation" (p. 88). The concept of sustainable entrepreneurship involves the mutual need for protection of the natural environment and society's sustainable development (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018b).

The central driver of sustainable entrepreneurship behavior is the pursuit of TBL ventures, meaning that a sustainable entrepreneur's key aim is to achieve economic, environmental, and social outcomes concurrently (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018a; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020). Sustainable entrepreneurs aim to solve societal and environmental problems with a successful business, using economic goals as both the means and the end. In addition, they integrate sustainability into their business missions, operations, and organizational processes (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018b; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Hence, sustainable entrepreneurship is a combination of the TBL perspective with the entrepreneurial process (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018b; Terán-Yépez et al., 2020).

Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) emphasized that sustainable entrepreneurs consider sustainable development as a unique business opportunity that helps transform the existing economy into a sustainable economy, creating solutions for various social and environmental aspects. They also noted that sustainable entrepreneurs possess strong environmental and social values in combination with their entrepreneurial attitude and energy; thus, they demonstrate personal mastery and present their professional life as an act of creativity. In this regard, sustainable entrepreneurs are thought to be agents of change who are committed to seeking a triadic balance between economic viability, social welfare, and environmental protection (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018b).

2.2. Passion

Entrepreneurship generates substantial emotions in the players due to the existence of various pressures, risks, and uncertainty; in addition, personal consequences are tied up in the fate of the firm (Cardon et al., 2012). Entrepreneurship is a passionate process, full of emotional energy, drive, and spirit (Cardon et al., 2009; 2012). Chen et al. (2009) defined entrepreneurial passion as “an entrepreneur's intense affective state accompanied by cognitive and behavioral manifestations of high personal value” (p. 201). Passion is an essential aspect of entrepreneurship and can be the main driver behind entrepreneurship (Chen et al., 2009).

Entrepreneurial passion has been conceptualized as involving consciously accessible and intensely motivational positive affects experienced by engaging in entrepreneurial activities related to roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of entrepreneurs (Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014). It has been well recognized that passion is a key predictor of entrepreneurs' dedication and commitment to their ventures, their persistence in pursuing venture-related goals and activities, and their ability to stay fully engaged in their actions (Cardon et al., 2009). Entrepreneurial passion has also been reported to be contagious to other key stakeholders of the firm, such as employees and investors (Cardon et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014).

The question of what sustainable entrepreneurs are passionate about is critical because the object of one's passion can have important implications for the types of behaviors entrepreneurs engage in, such as persistence, creative problem-solving, and the outcomes of such behaviors, such as firm performance (Cardon et al., 2009; 2017). This is a critical question that has been neglected in literature. Mitchell (2014) stated that “the sustainable apparel entrepreneur is the product of a reflexive relationship between one's core values and one's end product, which results in the

affirmation of the entrepreneur as sustainable entrepreneur” (p. 151-152). It is possible that a sustainable apparel entrepreneur's passion may be something different than what has been stated in the sustainable entrepreneurship literature.

2.3. Challenges in sustainable apparel entrepreneurship

Over the last decade, apparel firms have been increasingly active in promoting sustainable apparel (Goworek et al., 2020; Su et al., 2019). Sustainable apparel is described as clothing products which incorporate one or more aspects of environmental and social sustainability; these include using biodegradable materials and/or organic fiber materials and implementation of fair-trade principles while not harming the environment or workers (Goworek et al., 2012; Harris et al., 2016; Henninger et al., 2016). Response to environmental degradation and social concerns in the global apparel industry inspires the development of products and processes with higher environmental and social gains, creating a niche consumer market. Moreover, this movement also generates entrepreneurial opportunities in sustainability-oriented innovations (Heinze, 2020; Lawless & Medvedev, 2016).

Sustainable entrepreneurs can be torn between their economic, environmental, and social goals. Often, they must make trade-offs between these goals. For example, they need to make a choice between scaling up economically and not compromising environmental and social sustainability goals. Adding the “sustainable” component to an apparel business highlights the importance of addressing relationships between the apparel business, the natural environment, people, and society. Apparel small business owners especially may experience a tension between producing/selling sustainable clothing and producing/selling whatever apparel products they want, whether environmentally friendly or not, socially responsible or not, local or not, and in season or not. Thus, the need for research on challenges faced by sustainable apparel entrepreneurs as their businesses were initiated and expanded is particularly critical.

3. Method

A qualitative approach, which involves interviews from a purposive sample, was used in this research. The purposive sample strategy is suitable for a specific type of entrepreneur and allows a relatively homogeneous and small sample (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018a). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, within the researchers' existing network with industrial practitioners, five sustainable apparel entrepreneurs in the Southeastern U.S. were identified and took part in semi-structured interviews. Due to the challenging nature of identifying qualified participants, it is possible with a small number of business cases of in-depth interviews to achieve acceptable validity of results (Yin, 2018). Before the scheduled interviews, we gained prior knowledge about the background of each of the five firms by reviewing their firms' web sites and other online materials about them. This background study provided us a holistic picture of the sustainable apparel market.

The interviews were conducted by phone or in-person, and with consent from the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min to one hour. The open-ended questions explored the business background, what the participants think (beliefs) and feel (attitudes) about sustainable apparel in their businesses and their entrepreneurial actions. In

particular, the entrepreneurs were asked about their passions and problems with their entrepreneurial experience in the sustainable apparel businesses. After the data collection, we followed the thematic analysis procedure addressed by Nowell et al. (2017), including familiarizing the researchers themselves with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. To establish reliability, each data set was investigated independently by two members of the research team and discussions were held in the team to reach consensus. Disagreements were resolved through the involvement of the third researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Participants' profile

The participants' demographic information is summarized in Table 1. Three are male, and two are female small apparel business owners. Four of them started their sustainable apparel business when they founded their firms; one entrepreneur started his company as a small, manual screen-printing operation, but converted to a sustainable apparel business in 1994.

Table 1. Summary of participants' demographic information.

	Gender	The year the business was founded	Major business
Participant A	Male	2012	Sustainable apparel manufacturing (mainly men's and women's sweaters and accessories)
Participant B	Female	2003	Organic apparel for women's
Participant C	Male	2013	Custom clothing (men's clothing including custom shirting, sport coats, accessories)
Participant D	Female	2014	Sustainable apparel for women
Participant E	Male	1977/1994	Sustainable printed tee shirts (since 1994)

4.2. Interpretation and discussion

4.2.1. Passion

Regarding RQ1, all the respondents indicated that they are passionate about contributing to sustainability by being creative, and they want to feel good about what they are doing when creating sustainable apparel products. They hope to do better things for the planet and people and change the industry by being ahead of the industry's sustainability evolution. They appreciate the mutual support between their sustainable businesses and the local community. Fulfilling the promise of entrepreneurship as a solution to, rather than the cause of, environmental degradation and social inequality requires nurturing motives and triggering particular actions beyond creating TBL firms mechanistically. The four themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed below.

Theme #1: Passion for what they are making/selling – sustainable apparel products. All the participants are passionate about what they are doing, and they feel proud of their sustainable business models. There was a consensus that all the business owners took great pride in what they were doing. They are passionate about being responsible and creative at the same time, and

their creative processes were tied to sustainable ways of running an apparel business. Every entrepreneur is passionate about some innovative products in their lives and wanted to create a way to share that with others. For example, participant A started his company using 3 D knitting machines. With 3 D knitting technology, their garments were made sustainable with zero waste. Participant C is passionate about manufacturing and selling high quality custom clothing which is handmade by second and third generation seamstresses in some of the last remaining factories right here in the USA. His apparel business model is not time-based but quality-based and represents a shift from quantity to quality. He aspires to incorporate the concepts of sustainability into their seasonless clothing pieces.

The entrepreneurial process starts with innovation which may originate from various sources, including personal experiences or social and environmental influences (Min & Wilson, 2019). Each of the participants valued the creativity in their sustainable apparel business which allows them to express their personal values and experiences in an innovative way. For example, both participant B and participant D have arts and design backgrounds; they found themselves enjoying the apparel design and product development process, and their passion for fashion design and sustainability led them to decide to run the sustainable apparel businesses after graduating from college. Moreover, they both had experiences in living and traveling abroad, which affects their designs and remains a source of inspiration for their sustainable fashion businesses. They want to bring awareness of sustainability to the fact that they can contribute to a sustainable economy while developing cool and trendy sustainable clothing. The following two excerpts clearly demonstrate their passion.

Sustainability business is something I can be proud of and I can be creative. During my time abroad, I came to understand why sustainable and slow fashion is so important. I saw the benefit that a fair wage can have on society, and I experienced firsthand the positive effects of manufacturing organic clothing. (Participant D)

We are proud to be pioneers in the Green Clothing Movement! We feel good about what we are doing while still doing the creative work we love each day!! It's important to feel good about that. We create artisanal organic clothing for women who love sustainable fashion. We use a Lean or Made to Order production method, which produces less waste, uses less energy, and is overall a more sustainable system. (Participant B)

Theme #2: Passion for a sustainable future for the planet and people. All the participants engage in the TBL of sustainability when running their businesses. They showed strong concerns about environmental degradation and social inequality in the apparel industry. Their deep concern ignited their passion for helping by saying “I have to do something.” There was a strong feeling that what they do has an immediate impact on the planet and people, so every decision they make takes TBL into consideration.

These entrepreneurs embody several sustainability ideals, such as respect for nature, shared responsibility, equality, and solidarity, which direct their goals and practices. Their personal values play a significant role in their desire to contribute to sustainability and serve as a powerful source of entrepreneurial passion. All the participants are passionate about more than just the clothes; they are passionate about a sustainable lifestyle embodied in sustainable clothing. They

are committed to custom sustainable and ethically responsible clothing through their creativity and efforts in understanding clothing's environmental and social impact on our lives. The following excerpts from participant B and participant E clearly demonstrate their passion for a sustainable future for the planet and people.

Working with sustainable materials creates security on multiple levels. It creates sustainable farming jobs, healthier work conditions for all levels of production, and of course, is better for the planet and all who live on it. (Participant B)

Because of NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and the business being destroyed, that put us on a journey of running a business to pursue the "triple bottom line" of sustainability.... people, planet, profit; it's not just about making money. (Participant E)

Theme #3: Passion for building a strong local community. All the interviewees support their local communities and use the most localized sourcing possible for their products, with as much domestic sourcing as possible. Sourcing locally is beneficial to the environment, as it uses less transportation and consequently causes lower carbon emissions. Moreover, they all included giving back to the local community in their business models. For example, participant C's business model includes a "Giving Back" initiative which makes an impact on local communities. Growing up in North Carolina (N.C.), participant D understood the importance of the textile industry in the state. Collaborating with local designers, local textile mills, and local communities has inspired her. In the interview, participant D emphasized that the local textile industry provides her a lot of support in developing her sustainable apparel business. Her sustainable apparel business, in turn, supports the local textile industry and benefits local people.

N.C. is a great place to start the fashion business. You can visit textile factories, dye houses, and sewing facilities, and you can meet people there, build a connection with the industry. I can also support my community. It is a good way to support the local textile community, producers, local designers, and artists as well. (Participant D)

Participant E's business offers made-in-the-USA t-shirts with a transparent supply chain that traces back to U.S. cotton farmers and/or mill workers. His company's organic t-shirts are cut, sewn, and finished on U.S. soil and made from the best organic cotton on the planet. When it outsources organic cotton, it uses the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS) certified yarns. The company sells mainly to local, environmentally, and socially conscious businesses and organizations. The following excerpt clearly demonstrates participant E's passion for supporting the local community.

The [positive] impact it has on the environment... The impact it has on the community. Sourcing where you live enriches the community in which you live, so again it's a complicated story because a lot of people want to save a few dollars here and there, but it means unemploying your neighbor, then that's a cost to your community and also to your quality of life. (Participant E)

Theme #4: Passion for changing the apparel industry. Being able to bring about a change in the apparel industry was a sentiment felt by all the business owners in various ways. For some, it was focused on how the garments are produced, like made-to-order or demand-based manufacturing (participants A and C), while for others, it was a combination of production and consumption (participants B, D and E). Whatever the methodology, they all agreed that change in the apparel industry was needed for the good of the planet and its people. As participant A explained, “We want to change the industry. Garments are made the same way as they were in the 50 years ago; it's unsustainable, not responsible. This [3D] manufacturing process allows us to change the industry for the better.”

Participant D echoed this sentiment with her belief that apparel sustainability is not only sustainable production – how the garment is made, but also how the garment is ultimately consumed. In other words, the change needs to come from both garment producers/marketers and consumers.

I believe that sustainability includes two parts: the way it is produced and the way it is consumed. The first part means not only minimizing waste and choosing a low impact fabric, but also being conscious of who is making the clothes and ensuring that they are working in a healthy environment. The second part is how the garment is utilized by the consumer. A sustainable garment is one that is treasured and worn over and over.
(Participant D)

Literature maintains that entrepreneurs embracing the notion of sustainability propose a reassessment of the relationship between economic business activities and social and natural environments. They see themselves as instrumental in changing business-nature relationship which leads to a more sustainable society (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018a). Sustainable apparel entrepreneurs we interviewed have demonstrated that they tend to act as catalysts for social change and take the lead in giving direction to change (Muñoz & Cohen, 2018a). They are all knowledgeable about sustainability issues in the apparel industry. Their passion and their apparel sustainability knowledge coordinated their behaviors and inspired them to start their sustainable apparel ventures. Four themes emerged from the interviews indicate that entrepreneurial passion can fuel motivation, improve cognitive and behavior activity, and provide meaning to everyday work. In developing their small businesses, the sustainable apparel entrepreneurs see themselves as change makers actively responding to the emerging social and environmental issues in the apparel industry and use their businesses and market forces to help bring about the necessary changes.

4.2.2. Challenges in sustainable apparel entrepreneurship

Understanding challenges faced by small business owners can assist future entrepreneurs in anticipating the problems they may face in order to grow (Gobagoba & Littrell, 2003). Regarding RQ2, three themes that emerged from all interviews include limited options (shortage of sustainable raw materials and local mills that will work with them), price considerations (issues related to higher costs associated with producing, distributing, marketing and retailing of sustainable apparel products), and the need to change the consumer's mindset about sustainable products on multiple fronts, including quality, cost, and fashionable attributes.

Theme #1: Limited options. There are several reasons the participants touched on that have created a lack of options. Some mentioned include the lack of dye houses due in part to tough government regulations, the lack of skilled workers in the apparel realm, and the difficulty in finding producers in the marketplace. All the participants emphasized sourcing materials locally so that they can get the yarns and fibers that they need quickly. This system has also helped keep costs for their products low. However, some of their materials must be sourced from overseas. For example, participants A and C source their wool yarns from Italy; participants B, D and E source their organic cotton from India, Pakistan, Turkey or China through GOTS certified and Fair Trade certified (Ecocert) because the USA can't provide an optimal climate for growing cotton organically without weed and pest problems.

In general, there is a dearth of options in all aspects of the sustainable apparel supply chain. Eco-friendly materials and natural organic fibers are limited in options and variations. For example, participant B uses only organic fabrics and fibers such as cotton, hemp, wool, and silk that are free of pesticides and dangerous chemicals. The dyes she uses are natural plant dyes or low-impact, fiber-reactive dyes with no heavy metals. Due to the limited supply of those organic fibers and eco-friendly dyes, she must go to specific places to get the organic fibers and natural plant dyes or environmentally friendly dyes. The following excerpt from participant C expressed this problem.

Having options is one thing, but also variation is another thing. A big piece of our business is making very specific things. You're limited in where you can buy fabric, in our case, but the variation in fabric. When you can buy, there's not going to be a ton of options to choose from, so that's been our biggest hindrance. (Participant C)

Theme #2: Price considerations. Price is a crucial barrier to creating a sustainable apparel business. Entrepreneurs recognize that apparel products are characterized as consumer-driven products; however, in the interview, they focused on the lack of awareness regarding considerations about short-term versus long-term cost orientation. Compared to a traditional clothing business, a sustainable apparel business spends more on raw materials and business operations, such as sourcing of sustainable materials and manufacturing of high-quality sustainable apparel products. The following excerpt from participant E demonstrates that systematic and long-term orientation on price is a major challenge for sustainable apparel entrepreneurs.

Their biggest issue is PRICE. Unfortunately, we live in a marketplace that only looks at short-term costs and passes on the negative external costs to the next generation...Price is our biggest concern, and we spend the majority of our time educating the customer. (Participant E)

Although the entrepreneurs did not start their sustainable apparel business solely for the economic goals, their businesses rely on achieving economic, environmental, and social outcomes concurrently. They contribute to solving societal and environmental problems through the realization of a successful apparel business, and their economic goals serve as both means and ends. The apparel industry has intense competition mainly based on price, so the extra costs

associated with running a sustainable apparel business exhibit a major obstacle for the apparel small business owners. As participant C explained,

We're hard on us because we control what we buy but made in the USA is more expensive. Customers, no matter what they say, if they're not willing to spend more money on that product, then we're limited in being able to continue producing it.
(Participant C)

Theme #3: Need to change the consumer's mindset. Besides the challenges in educating the consumers on the reasons why they should pay higher prices, which correlate to more sustainable products, there is also a stigma that the style of sustainable apparel products is less aesthetically pleasing than that of mainstream fashion apparel. As participant A pointed out, "Sustainable fashion in the past pushed people away from purchasing because it wasn't fashionable. We are bringing back the idea that sustainability can be fashionable."

All the small business owners try to change the old stereotypes about sustainable clothing, and they promote sustainability and style at the same time in their own unique ways. For example, participants B and D are female fashion designers. They create fashionable styles using organic fibers and eco-friendly fibers, and they believe you don't have to sacrifice style for ethics. Aesthetics are highlighted in their sustainable clothing products. Participants A and C promote time-honored design, and their products reflect the quality and craftsmanship required to create superior products and sustain the communities creating them. Participant E develops classic basic made-in-the-USA t-shirts using their patented sustainable print technology. Moreover, all the interviewees emphasized that it is important that consumers are savvy enough to demand products that are sustainably sourced to push the apparel industry in a more sustainable direction. A low level of consumer demand for sustainable clothing prevents the apparel industry from sustainable development, as participant C described in the interview, "I don't know that enough people are demanding it (sustainable apparel) so that there are not enough people making it." Thus, promoting sustainable clothing to enhance consumer purchase intention toward sustainable clothing is one of the goals of all participants.

Three themes that emerged from the interviews regarding the challenges in sustainable apparel entrepreneurship are in line with a recent study from Heinze (2020). Managing the challenges in a sustainable apparel business is not easy, especially for apparel entrepreneurs; because the apparel supply chain is complex and widely spread around the globe. Sustainable entrepreneurs must deal with challenges in finding investors, suppliers, and customers who understand their businesses and share their values. Sustainable entrepreneurs face a multiplicity of ecological, social, and economic factors, which challenges traditional views of entrepreneurship.

5. Conclusion and implications

The study contributes to the literature in apparel entrepreneurship and sustainability in the apparel industry and provides practical implications to the apparel industry at large. We found that sustainability plays a crucial role in the business models of all the five sustainable apparel entrepreneurs. When it comes to sustainable apparel, small business owners are driven by a passion for sustainability and use apparel products and their ventures for their sustainability

goals (Heinze, 2020). Our study supports previous literature that the entrepreneurial motivation of sustainable entrepreneurs transcends beyond the dualistic necessity-driven and opportunity-driven categories (Terán-Yépez et al., 2020). Sustainable apparel entrepreneurs are motivated by their clear social and environmental goals to pursue apparel entrepreneurial opportunities, and the simultaneous achievement of the economic, social, and environmental benefits and goals refers to the TBL that sustainable entrepreneurship seeks to achieve (Heinze, 2020; Lawless & Medvedev, 2016).

Although the five sustainable apparel entrepreneurs have different times of existence, from just six years to about twenty-six years, they share many similarities, particularly regarding entrepreneurial passion and challenges. Sustainable apparel businesses were born not out of a desire to start an apparel venture but to start a sustainable enterprise. Each entrepreneur develops their unique, sustainable apparel products and establishes their brands by leveraging environmental and social sustainability (Heinze, 2020; Lawless & Medvedev, 2016).

The research findings indicate that apparel entrepreneurs communicate their views on sustainability to their customers in a variety of ways, from more subtle strategies to overt messaging (Heinze, 2020). Moreover, specific aspects of sustainability communicated vary by company, from the idea of American made, to sustainable fibers, to enjoying nature and providing jobs for communities and local economies. The study findings imply that for researchers, it is pertinent to address apparel small business owner's view of what sustainability is, and it is important to recognize various aspects of passion in entrepreneurs' sustainable apparel businesses. Furthermore, our study emphasizes that apparel researchers and industry practitioners should give sufficient attention to the demand side of the apparel industry. Emerging trends in consumer movement open a new world for apparel firms to tap into the potential of sustainable apparel to gain a new competitive advantage (Goworek et al., 2020; Su et al., 2019). As price is a major obstacle to sustainable apparel entrepreneurs, it is necessary to educate consumers about the characteristics of sustainable apparel and the various costs associated with producing, marketing, and consuming sustainable clothing products. A better understanding of consumer demand, preferences, and their perceptions on the price of sustainable apparel helps apparel entrepreneurs make sound short-term and long-term planning for sustainable futures.

In addition, the apparel industry needs to provide support and guidance on sustainable apparel business to entrepreneurs. Support from various sources (apparel higher education, the apparel industry, local community, consumers, government, etc.) should be provided to encourage more sustainable apparel small businesses and ensure that existing sustainable apparel enterprises grow to maturity (Lawless & Medvedev, 2016).

The study provided valuable insights into sustainable apparel entrepreneurship. However, it is necessary to present the limitations of the study for future research opportunities. First, although five sustainable apparel entrepreneurs interviewed in this study provided us with rich and reliable information for our qualitative research, future studies in sustainable apparel businesses should be done by using larger samples. Second, the study only focuses on sustainable apparel entrepreneurs in the Southeastern U.S. Future research could include a broader sampling of sustainable apparel companies in the U.S. Third, as sustainable apparel entrepreneurship is a

global trend that warrants a deeper understanding, future research could employ a global or even cross-cultural approach.

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