

SWAMY, UMA. Ph.D. From Soil to Salesfloor: Exploring the Potential for Retailer Integration into the Fibershed Soil-to-Soil Framework. (2024)
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The fast fashion industry has been associated with significant environmental, social, and individual consequences, prompting a growing interest in sustainable apparel and textile supply chains, as well as sustainable fashion practices. Fibershed, a concept that encourages the production of local sustainable textile and apparel production, has the potential to be a local sustainable supply chain alternative that can counter the challenges posed by fast fashion. Fibershed is a non-profit organization comprised of a network of farmers and local businesses that operates within specific geographical boundaries. This network is dedicated to reconfiguring local infrastructures for processing raw materials, particularly wool, and transforming them into high quality garments. The Fibershed Soil-to-Soil (S2S) Framework is a closed loop supply chain based on sustainability values and principles that elucidates the links in the value chain of a regional Fibershed. This S2S Framework is based on a closed loop supply chain, whereby the process of fiber production starts at the farm/ranch and goes through different stages of production and consumption, to ultimately be composted and returned to the soil. Members range from ranchers and farmers to textile processors, designers and producers who are involved in the Fibershed ecosystem and produce sustainable textiles, apparel, and accessories. However, presently the role of local retailers within the Fibershed S2S Framework remains largely unexplored. This dissertation aimed to address this gap by investigating the perceptions and expectations of sustainability among Fibershed members, examining the factors influencing consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, and proposing strategies for integrating local retailers into the S2S Framework.

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, grounded in Social Practice Theory, to achieve its objectives. In Phase I, with IRB approval, a qualitative exploration was conducted through netnographic observation and in-depth interviews with Fibershed members to understand their perceptions of sustainability and the potential role of local retailers within the Fibershed S2S Framework. Four main themes emerged: (1) *Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings*; (2) *Community-Centric Sustainability*; (3) *Consumer Awareness and Engagement*; and (4) *Selling Sustainability*. These findings informed the development of a conceptual model for Phase II, which investigated the influence of consumer values and awareness on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, as well as their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Social Practice Theory (SPT) was used as the theoretical background for the study. An empirical survey-based research method was used to test the hypothesized relationships among latent constructs of consumers' community attachment and need for uniqueness, consumer awareness of environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production, consumer perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. A total of 28 items were adopted from the literature using a five-point Likert-type scale. With IRB approval, an electronic survey using Qualtrics was distributed via the online research platform Prolific. A purposive sampling approach was applied, and participants over the age of 18 and located in the United States were targeted. A sample of 300 valid responses were obtained and used for statistical analysis.

Structural equation modeling, employing latent variable path analysis and using SPSS AMOS version 29, was utilized to evaluate the model and assess both the measurement and

structural model fit. The results indicated significant positive relationships between community attachment and consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity. Need for uniqueness was found to positively influence consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intentions to patronize these retailers. Consumers' awareness of the environmental impact of apparel and textile production positively influenced their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intentions to patronize these retailers. However, the hypothesized relationships involving consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production were not supported. Consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity were found to have significant positive effects on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on sustainable supply chains, sustainable apparel consumption behavior, and Social Practice Theory by demonstrating the interconnectedness of materials, competences, and meanings in shaping sustainable apparel consumption practices. This study positions the concept of Fibershed as a local sustainable supply chain alternative. The results highlight the importance of fostering strong community connections, offering unique and authentic products, and raising environmental awareness in order to influence consumers to patronize local retailers as well as promote locally-produced sustainable apparel. The non-significant results regarding social impact awareness underscore the need for further research to explore the complex relationships between different dimensions of sustainability and consumer behavior. Through the application of Social Practice Theory, this dissertation has identified the potential significance for the various elements within the Fibershed ecosystem in the broader context of sustainable apparel and textile consumption practices.

Findings from this dissertation offer valuable insights for Fibershed, local retailers, policymakers, and sustainable fashion advocates. Specifically, the findings emphasize the importance of local retailers in promoting sustainable production and consumption practices and propose strategies for integrating them into the Fibershed S2S Framework. These strategies include developing a strong network of committed local retailers, collaborating with Fibershed on educational initiatives, encouraging community engagement among consumers and members of the Fibershed network, and supporting sustainable business practices throughout the supply chain.

FROM SOIL TO SALESFLOOR: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL FOR RETAILER
INTEGRATION INTO THE FIBERSHED SOIL-TO-SOIL FRAMEWORK

by

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DEDICATION

To the Great Almighty for making this whole thing possible.

My heartfelt gratitude to my husband Sivaskandan for his love, patience, unwavering support, and sacrifices during this time.

To my parents - Raji & Nagarajan and Saraswati & Swami for their boundless love and encouragement. They have been my guiding light throughout this journey.

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves as an introduction to the dissertation and consists of the following sections: (1) Statement of the Research Problem; (2) Background; (3) Research Gaps; (4) Purpose and Objectives; (5) Research Design; (6) Scope and Significance; (7) Definition of Key Terms; and (8) Outline of the Dissertation.

Statement of the Research Problem

The democratization of fashion, where all classes of consumers can purchase the latest fashion trends at low prices, has led to an increasing demand for fast fashion (Bick et al., 2018; Gabrielli et al., 2013; Thomas, 2019). *Fast fashion* is the term generally used for garments that are mass produced in large volumes and are inexpensive, trendy, and sold in chain stores (Fletcher, 2010). Consumers' demands for the latest trends in fashion at low prices has led to the exponential growth of fast fashion retailers, who source their products from countries that manufacture at a low cost, allowing them to sell these products at very competitive prices (Fletcher, 2010; Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009).

Increased globalization has led to the shifting of production centers from regional markets to countries where the manufacturing costs are much lower due to inexpensive labor, poor working conditions, and limited environmental controls (Bick et al., 2018). Similarly, increased demand by consumers has pushed global retailers to establish supply chains for fast fashion merchandise with lower costs and compressed lead times. An unintended but very real consequence of this push has been substantial negative implications for humans, the environment, and societies across the globe (Thomas, 2019).

Labor has been negatively impacted in developed countries when production moved to less expensive developing countries. Consequently, the decline of manufacturing industries in the US decimated economic centers that were dependent on the manufacturing economy for survival (Hodges & Frank, 2013; Thomas, 2019). Moreover, human rights within those developing nations where manufacturing has been moved to have also been compromised. Many workers have become victims of unsafe labor practices and have little to no say regarding their working conditions (Bick et al., 2018; Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019; Kumar, 2021; Thomas, 2019).

Last, but not least, fast fashion has also had a negative impact on the environment. Dyes, chemicals, and pesticides used in the production and manufacture of textiles have led to environmental degradation (Bick et al., 2018). Synthetic fabrics have released microfibers, polluting water sources and affecting food chains (Thomas, 2019). Disposal of used as well as unsold garments has become a major cause for concern. Clothing has become easily disposable, as it is neither expensive nor durable, and consumers often donate used clothing thinking that it will be reused. However, only 10% of all donated clothing is actually reused (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017). The remaining items, most of which are non-biodegradable, either find their way to low-income countries, thereby destroying their local garment industries, or end up in landfills, ultimately contaminating the soil and water tables (Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009; Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017).

Awareness is gradually spreading among diverse sections of the global population regarding the harmful effects of excess consumption on the environment as well as the social inequalities that have emerged (Euromonitor International, 2022). Individuals and organizations are looking for ways to reduce the harmful effects of fast fashion consumption (Burgess &

White, 2019). Companies are beginning to consider the ecological and social implications of fast fashion and are exploring alternative ways of production with less impact on the environment and society (Burgess & White, 2019). Akin to the *Slow Food* movement, which was developed as a response to the fast-food culture that epitomized homogenized and quantity eating, the *Slow Fashion* movement seeks to reconnect people with their local communities, promote small-scale production, and encourage local, artisanal, and traditional craft techniques (Burgess & White, 2019; Fletcher, 2010). The design process of the slow fashion movement considers the impact of manufacturing on resource flows, employees, communities, and ecosystems. Slow fashion democratizes fashion, not by offering access to inexpensive fashion, but by giving consumers more control over the institutions and technologies that impact their lives (Fletcher, 2008). Movements like the *Great American Apparel Diet* that advocate voluntary simplicity in fashion and new forms of fashion retail are now emerging (McNeill & Snowdon, 2019).

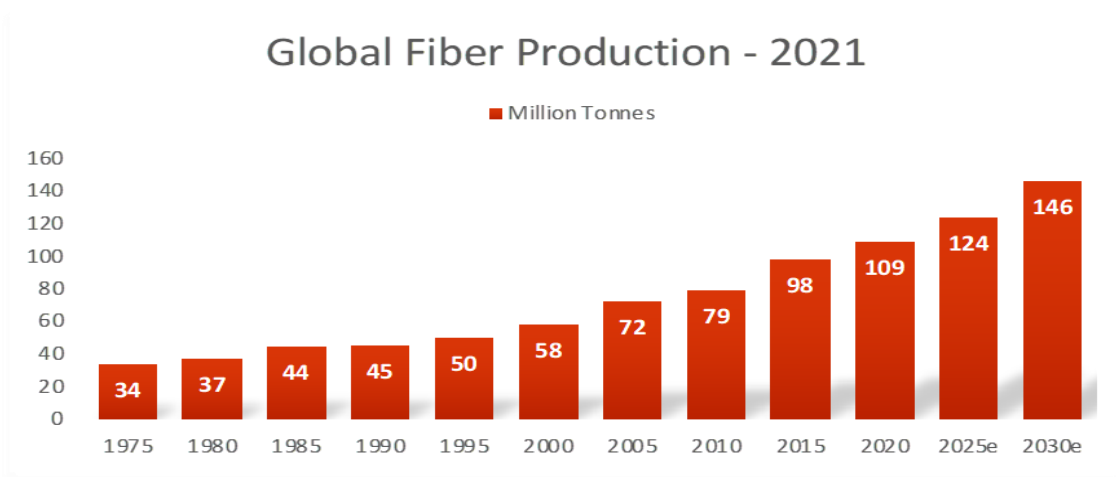
As will be discussed throughout this dissertation, *Fibershed* is an outgrowth of the slow fashion movement that is focused on creating textiles and garments based on sustainability principles. Fibershed is a local, place-based system that focuses on natural, social, and physical resources available in a specific geographical area. The Fibershed *Soil-to-Soil (S2S) Framework* is a network of members ranging from ranchers and farmers to textile processors, designers and producers who are involved in the Fibershed ecosystem and produce sustainable textiles, apparel, and accessories (Fibershed, n.d.). This dissertation explores Fibershed as an approach to a more sustainable supply chain.

Background

The Global Textile and Apparel Industry

The global fashion industry is one of the largest and most economically important industries in the world. This industry drives a significant portion of the global economy, with annual revenues between \$1.7 trillion to \$ 2.5 trillion in retail sales dollars (Fashion United, n.d.) and employing over 300 million workers worldwide (Euromonitor International, 2021). An increase in clothing consumption over time has led to a substantial increase in fiber and textile production. Sixty percent of fiber production globally is used in the fashion industry, with the remaining being used for interior, industrial, or other purposes (Niinimaki et al., 2020). As illustrated in Figure 1, global fiber production in 2020 was estimated at around 109 million metric tons, which is more than 3 times the levels consumed 50 years ago. At the current rate of production, the industry is expected to grow by 34%, with production volumes estimated to reach 146 million metric tons by 2030 (Textile Exchange, 2021).

Figure 1. Global Fiber Production 2021



Note. Recreated based on a market report by Textile Exchange (2021) titled “Preferred

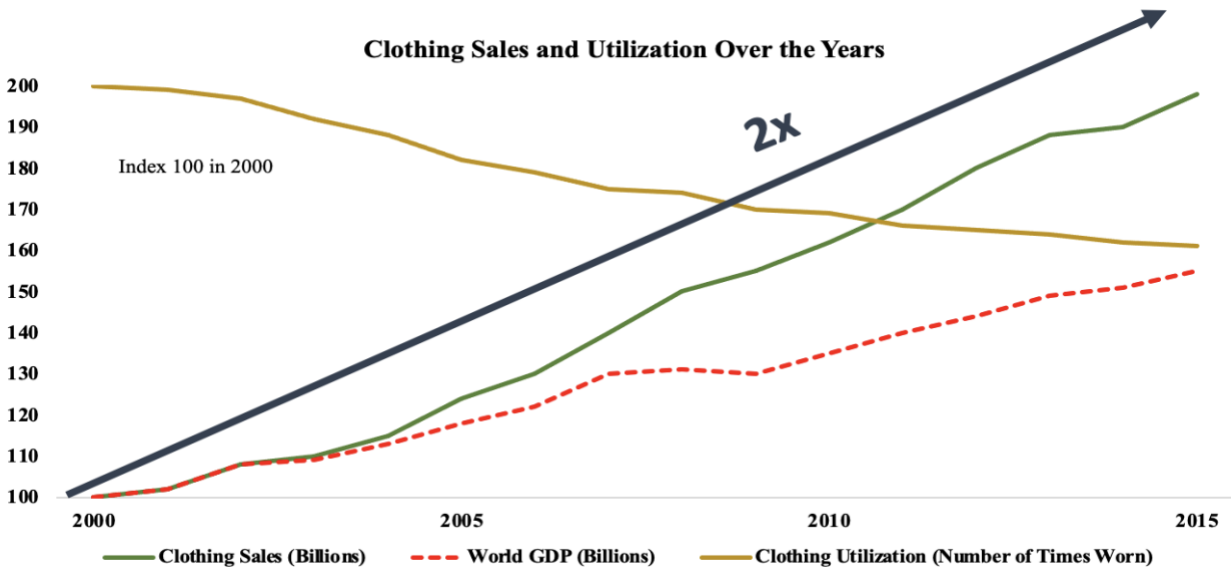
Fiber and Materials.”

Arguably, the use of inexpensive synthetic fibers and increased efficiencies have reduced the overall costs of production in the fashion industry (Niinimaki et al., 2020). The production of synthetic fabrics has increased over the decades, with polyester gaining the most prominence. Polyester, a fiber based on fossil fuels, has gained importance due to its versatility, and its production increased from 5 million tons in the 1970s to over 57 million in 2020 (Textile Exchange, 2021). Lower costs of production and an increase in volumes produced and consumed have pushed down the prices of fashion products, making them more accessible to the global population. As a result, clothing is often considered disposable (Claudio, 2007). To cater to the ‘throwaway consumer culture,’ major brands and companies like H&M, Inditex, Asos, and Uniqlo are flooding the market with cheap clothing (Reimann, 2023). For example, the popular, ultra-fast fashion brand Shein’s business model of low-priced and trend-led fashion, coupled with strong social media marketing over platforms like Tik Tok and Instagram, has helped the company become one of the largest apparel brands in the world. It operates like a giant online marketplace and connects over 6,000 apparel manufacturers, allowing them to create micro-orders on demand, whereby small batches of orders can be produced without the constraints of minimum order quantities. Consequently, the brand adds approximately 3,000 new styles to their site daily (Euromonitor International, 2022). However, Shein’s business practices have raised ethical concerns at various levels, as the company has been accused of working with contractors who violate labor laws, and that break copyright infringement laws, to name just a few of the accusations that have recently emerged (Testa, 2022).

In terms of the harmful effects of fast fashion, the fashion industry is one of the largest when it comes to global pollution (Dodds et al., 2020). The fast fashion industry is built on a

model of overproduction and overconsumption (Arthur, 2020). Clothing is produced in massive quantities, often in countries with low labor costs, and then shipped around the world to be sold at low prices (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017). Consumers are encouraged to buy more and more clothing, with new styles and trends introduced every few weeks, leading to a culture of disposable fashion, wherein clothing is worn once or twice and then discarded (Reimann, 2023). As illustrated in Figure 2, clothing sales have doubled between 2000 to 2015, while the average number of times a garment is worn has dropped by 36% (EMF, 2017).

Figure 2. Growth of Clothing Sales and Decline in Clothing Utilization Since 2000

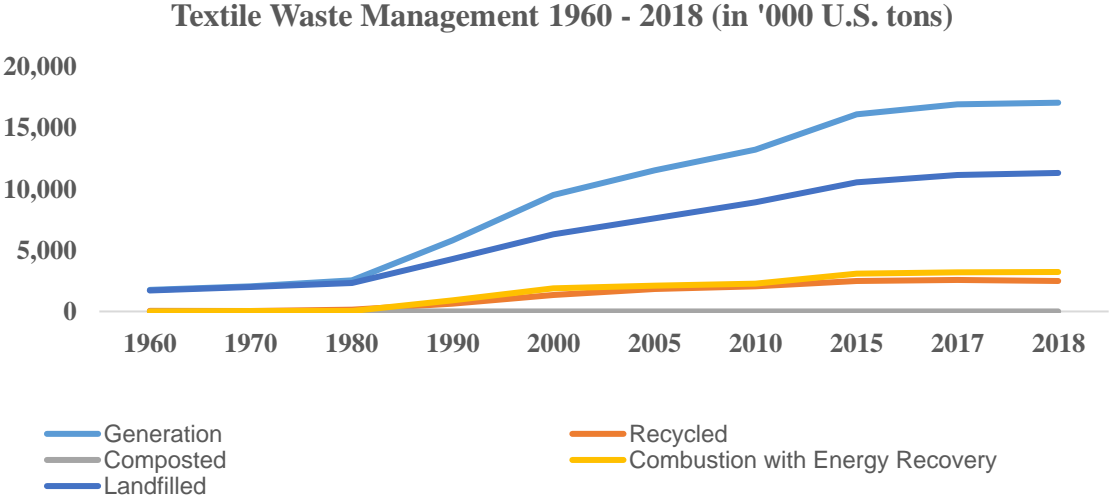


Note. Recreated based on the report by Ellen McArthur Foundation (2017) titled “A New Textiles Economy: Redesigning Fashion’s Future.”

Approximately \$500 billion worth of garments is being disposed of after being worn only a few times, and instead of being recycled, it is being burned, shredded, or thrown into the trash (Mulhern, 2022; Thomas, 2019). The increased global production and consumption has also led to a drastic increase in textile waste (Textiles Tuesday, n.d.). As illustrated in Figure 3, the textile

industry alone generated approximately 17 million tons of waste in 2018, representing 6% of the total waste generated in the municipal solid waste (MSW) system in the United States in that year (USEPA, 2022). Out of the 17 million tons of waste generated, approximately 15% of the waste was recycled, 19% combusted with energy recovered, and the remaining 67% was landfilled (USEPA, 2022). In roughly six decades, the amount of textile waste generated in the US has increased approximately ten times (USEPA, 2022).

Figure 3. Textile Waste Management in the USA from 1960 to 2018



Note. Recreated based on market report by USEPA (2022) titled “Textile Waste Management: 1960-2018.”

The increase in overall production of garments over the decades, coupled with both the reduction in average lifetime usage of garments (as illustrated in Figure 2), and the increase in textile waste (as illustrated in Figure 3), clearly establishes a pattern of overproduction, lower utilization rate of garments, overconsumption, and increased waste. This model of overproduction and overconsumption, which is focused on growth and profits, has had a number of downsides (Arthur, 2020). For example, the production of clothing requires vast amounts of

natural resources, including water, energy, and raw materials such as cotton (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017). The production process also generates significant amounts of waste, including chemical runoff and greenhouse gas emissions, and consequently, the fashion industry alone is responsible for up to 8% of global carbon emissions (Chrobot et al., 2018). Moreover, the textile dyeing industry is considered the second largest water polluter globally, as it is typical for around 2000 gallons of water to be used to produce just one pair of jeans (UNEP, 2018). Likewise, approximately 9% of microplastic pollution in the oceans is attributed to the textile industry (UNEP, 2018). In addition, the transportation of clothing around the world contributes to carbon emissions and air pollution (Fletcher, 2010; Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). There is also a human cost: low wages, long working hours, and unsafe working conditions (UNEP, 2018). Clearly, a radical shift in patterns of production and consumption is required to ensure the survival of the planet and its people (UNEP, 2018).

Sustainable Fashion

Although many definitions exist in the literature, generally, *sustainable fashion* refers to garment sourcing and production processes that are environmentally sustainable, are locally produced, provide good working conditions and fair wages to workers, and produce a small carbon footprint (Henninger et al., 2016). The plight of the global textile worker and the industry's negative effect on the planet has raised awareness among consumers of the harmful effects of fast fashion and the need for change (Euromonitor International, 2022). As found by a recent Euromonitor International (2022) survey on consumer activism, more consumers are recognizing the importance of reducing energy consumption, recycling, reducing plastic use, and giving second life to products through rental and second-hand markets. Consumers are

increasingly expecting fashion brands to become purpose-driven, support social initiatives, and contribute to the fight against climate change (Euromonitor International, 2022).

Some fashion brands have begun moving their production facilities closer to their end markets, exploring innovations in sustainable and localized supply chains as well as micro fulfillment centers (Euromonitor International, 2022). There is a growing initiative toward product and material innovations, such as eco-friendly, plant-based, and recycled fibers (Szekely & Strebel, 2013). Regulators are also working on measures to make the textile and apparel industries more environmentally responsible by imposing carbon taxes, and in some cases, even imposing a ban on the destruction of unsold garments (Euromonitor International, 2022). Some brands and retailers are beginning to address specific environmental and societal challenges, by seeking to lessen the negative impact of their supply chains (EMF, 2017; Szekely & Strebel, 2013).

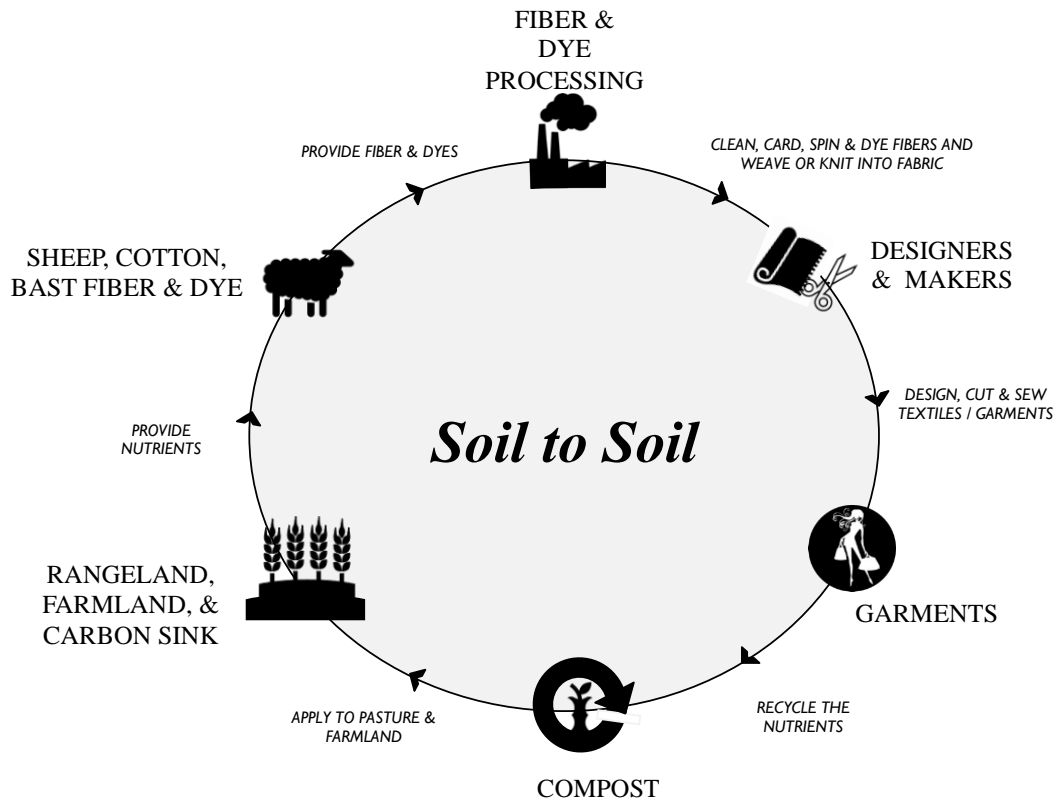
Through slow fashion, there is an increasing number of manufacturers, designers, and other entities focused on creating items that have more inherent value, curating the customer experience, and improving the quality of life for workers (Fletcher, 2008). The aim is to promote fundamental changes at the personal, social, and institutional levels, and focus on local and regional development rather than mass production (Burgess & White, 2019). Likewise, slow fashion gives recognition to local artisans and craftspersons and respects local traditions, while adopting modern technologies to reduce pollution and increase the overall efficiency of clothing production (EMF, 2017; Fletcher, 2008). Many of these factors also define Fibershed.

Fibershed and the Soil-to-Soil Framework

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, an emergent facet of the sustainable fashion movement is Fibershed. Fibershed is a growing movement of individuals and groups seeking to

create a garment production cycle that is based entirely on sustainability principles. Like a local watershed or foodshed, Fibershed is a local, place-based textile system focusing on the source of raw materials, transparency in the garment production process, as well as connectivity between different members of the network involved in the soil-to-soil process (e.g., from farming the fiber to composting the garment). An emerging topic in the sustainability and slow fashion literature, Fibershed is typically comprised of a group of businesses within a particular geographical area that are interested in creating apparel using eco-friendly processes by linking with the local community and, in turn, strengthening the local economy. To this end, Fibershed makes use of the natural, social, and physical resources available in a specific geographical area to produce garments (Burgess & White, 2019; *Fibershed*, n.d.). As a result, the Fibershed Soil-to-Soil (S2S) Framework is a “closed-loop” system, where the process of fiber production starts at the farm and then goes through processing and dyeing to be converted into fabric. Designers and makers subsequently use this fabric to construct garments. Once the lifespan of the garment is complete and it is ready for disposal, it can be composted and returned to the soil. The Fibershed S2S Framework (Figure 4) depicts the different links in the value chain of a regional Fibershed.

Figure 4. Fibershed Soil to Soil Framework



Note: Recreated based on The Fibershed Soil-to-Soil Framework (Source: Burgess & White, 2019)

Elaborating on the Fibershed S2S Framework in Figure 4, the Fibershed model encourages the process of producing place-based, climate-friendly fiber by encouraging farmers to adopt regenerative agricultural practices. Regenerative agriculture in rangelands and farmlands helps restore and maintain nature’s self-renewal ability and helps in the enhancement of atmospheric carbon capture by acting as “carbon sinks.” The plants and animals on the farm get their nutrients from this soil and convert the carbon into different types of fibers - cellulose fibers like cotton, jute, or hemp, and animal fibers like wool from sheep and alpacas. The farms are also a source of natural dyes that are used to dye the fibers. These fibers then undergo

processing like cleaning, carding, ginning, and dyeing, after which they are spun into yarns or woven or knitted into fabrics at the processing mills. Designers and apparel makers source the textiles locally and then design, cut, and sew them into garments, which are then sold to consumers who use them. Once these garments reach the end-of-life stage, they are composted with other organic matter and gradually decompose. The compost is returned back to the soil during the process of farming, the soil-to-soil cycle is complete, and the process becomes recursive (Burgess & White, 2019)

Research Gaps

According to Fletcher (2008, 2010), slow fashion promotes positive social and environmental relationships among different supply chain entities, based on the principles of quality, authenticity, durability, and localism. While the production of textiles and apparel often has a negative impact on the environment and social equity, there are alternatives, such as materials being used for developing textiles that are sustainable and economically, environmentally, and socially beneficial. Materials produced sustainably use less water, lead to less soil degradation, support local businesses and local economies, and promote awareness (Cao et al., 2014).

There are several gaps in existing research that this dissertation addresses. First, as a concept that meets the criteria of sustainable fashion by striving to develop local supply chains, Fibershed is based on the principles of ecological balance, local economies, sustainability, and community awareness (Burgess & White, 2019). Prior studies have used Fibershed as a case study to emphasize the benefits of the concept itself as a local sustainable slow fashion movement (Klepp & Tobiasson, 2022; Langdown, 2014). For example, Trejo et al. (2019) interacted with members of the New York Fibershed S2S Framework and created a collaborative

slow fashion model for the development of high-quality products. Trejo and Lewis (2020) studied the perspectives of the different entities involved in the supply chain to gain insights into the production aspects of slow fashion. Bieg et al. (2014) and Cao et al. (2014) conducted feasibility studies to assess the local production of cloth utilizing a vertically integrated supply chain. However, few studies focus on understanding the perceptions of and goals for sustainability among Fibershed network members, a gap that this dissertation addresses.

Second, an increasing number of firms are adopting sustainability initiatives in their operations to minimize social and environmental risks and governance challenges, as well as take advantage of the benefits of adopting sustainable practices within their supply chains (Strähle & Müller, 2017). Supply chain operational integration and optimization between suppliers and retailers using processes like electronic data interchange and just-in-time inventory methods help minimize environmental damage by reducing production waste and the need for transporting goods (Tang et al., 2016). Because retailers are situated between producers and consumers, they can influence change in production processes and consumption patterns by incorporating sustainability aspects in their business practices (Jones et al., 2005; Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Strähle & Müller, 2017). Specifically, sustainability in retail involves doing business by factoring in environmental and social impacts, from raw material acquisition to product use and disposal, and from the safety and well-being of workers to that of society as a whole (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021).

Several studies have focused on sustainable retailing to examine the challenges encountered and actions required by retailers to have a scalable impact (Jones et al., 2005; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2017), along with the mechanisms and conditions through which retailers' sustainability efforts gain positive responses from consumers (Hofenk et al.,

2019). Several literature reviews and content analyses on sustainable retailing have evaluated sustainability-related developments and practices specifically in retailing (Jones et al., 2005; Kotzab et al., 2011; Wiese et al., 2012). Likewise, prior studies have identified sustainability trends in retail research (Ruiz-Real et al., 2018), perspectives on sustainable retailing in the fashion industry (Yang et al., 2017), and the assessment of green retailing practices adopted by publicly traded retailers (Tang et al., 2016). Similarly, several studies have examined sustainable retailing from the consumer perspective. Prior research has examined the impact of different consumer values like community attachment (Miller, 2001; Wilson & Hodges, 2022), need for uniqueness (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Tian et al., 2001), as well as consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production (Dickson, 1999; Diddi & Niehm, 2016) on their perceptions of retailers, which again impacts consumers' attitudes and behaviors towards local retailers (Mauri et al., 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Yet, very few studies have investigated the combined effects of consumer values of community attachment and need for uniqueness, as well as consumer awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production on consumer perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability, authenticity, or their intentions to patronize local retailers. Moreover, no studies have investigated the effect of these factors on consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. This dissertation addresses this gap.

Last, as discussed in the previous section, in the Fibershed S2S Framework, one of the links is *Garments*, which represents the step where the fabric is constructed into apparel by designers and makers and made available for consumption by end users. In a traditional supply chain, the retailer usually plays the role of marketing and selling the goods to the end consumer. However, the Fibershed S2S Framework does not specify the role of the retailer, highlighting the

need for consideration of where the retailer fits within the Fibershed S2S Framework. Indeed, while the Fibershed community describes itself as “a network of farmers, ranchers, land managers, designers, ecologists, sewers, knitters, felters, and natural dyers, spinners and mill operators that have a defined a strategic geography to work and create within” (Fibershed, n.d., para. 1), there is no mention of the retailer. There are not many studies that investigate sustainability at the level of the local retailer, and no study has yet explored the role of the retailer in the Fibershed S2S network. Thus, this dissertation addresses these gaps.

In summary, this dissertation investigates three key issues overlooked in literature that are important to considering Fibershed as a slow fashion alternative. First, the dissertation explores the concept of Fibershed in general and the Fibershed S2S Framework in particular as an approach to sustainable fashion that counters the effect of fast fashion. Second, this study investigates consumers perceptions with regards to sustainable practices of local retailers to examine whether they would patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Lastly, this study explores how local retailers could be integrated into the Fibershed S2S Framework.

Purpose and Objectives

Previous studies have investigated the effects of fast fashion on the environment (Bick et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2010), as well as its impact on consumer consumption habits (Bick et al., 2018; Gabrielli et al., 2013; Joy et al., 2012; Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017), society (Burgess & White, 2019; Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019; Hodges & Karpova, 2006; Hodges & Lentz, 2010), and individuals (Bick et al., 2018; Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019; Kumar, 2021). Likewise, literature is emerging on different aspects of slow fashion and specifically its impact on the environment, society, and individuals (Cavender et al., 2021; Fletcher, 2008; Jung & Jin, 2014, 2016; Preuit &

Yan, 2017), as well as the need for more sustainable fashion practices (Burgess & White, 2019; Cataldi et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2008, 2010, 2018; Harrison, 2018). However, there is very limited research that explores in-depth the Fibershed concept relative to sustainable fashion (Burgess & White, 2019; Trejo & Lewis, 2020) and there is no literature related to the role of the local retailer within the Fibershed system. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework. To address this purpose, the following research objectives were developed:

1. To understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of Fibershed, and specifically relative to the S2S Framework.
2. To investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.
3. To explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to help address Fibershed goals for sustainability.

As discussed, the Fibershed S2S Framework does not specify the role of the retailer, highlighting the need for consideration of where the retailer fits within the Fibershed S2S Framework. Retailers play an important role in promoting sustainability in any supply chain network. Specifically, retailers can influence consumers by offering them choices regarding what kinds of products to buy, educating them on how to use and dispose of these products, and encouraging general consumption behaviors that are sustainable (Delai & Takahashi, 2013; Ruiz-Real et al., 2018; Youn et al., 2017). Despite this important role, there is very limited research on the topic of sustainability practices of local retailers, as well as the role of the local retailer within sustainable fashion.

Research Design

The aims of this dissertation are to gain an in-depth understanding of how members of the Fibershed community perceive the concept of sustainability, while exploring the perceptions of consumers about local retailers selling Fibershed products, and evaluating the potential role of the local retailer in the Fibershed S2S Framework. To address these aims, the dissertation employed a mixed methods research design. Greene et al. (1989) argued that different paradigm attributes are independent and can be mixed and matched with different method choices to determine the best way to address a particular problem. Mixed method research designs typically include at least one approach that is qualitative for depth and another that is quantitative for breadth (Greene et al., 1989). Given that the role of the retailer has thus far been overlooked in the Fibershed S2S Framework, a mixed-method research design was deemed appropriate for the dissertation in order to help capture the full scope of the topic.

As will be discussed in detail within Chapter III, the research design is comprised of two phases. Phase I involved a preliminary qualitative study to understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of the Fibershed community, especially among members of the S2S Framework. Qualitative research is “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world...Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). A qualitative approach is appropriate when a particular phenomenon needs to be explored or further insights are required (Hodges, 2011). To this end, the preliminary qualitative study consisted of netnographic observation and in-depth interviews in order to provide a more in-depth understanding of Fibershed and its goals for sustainability.

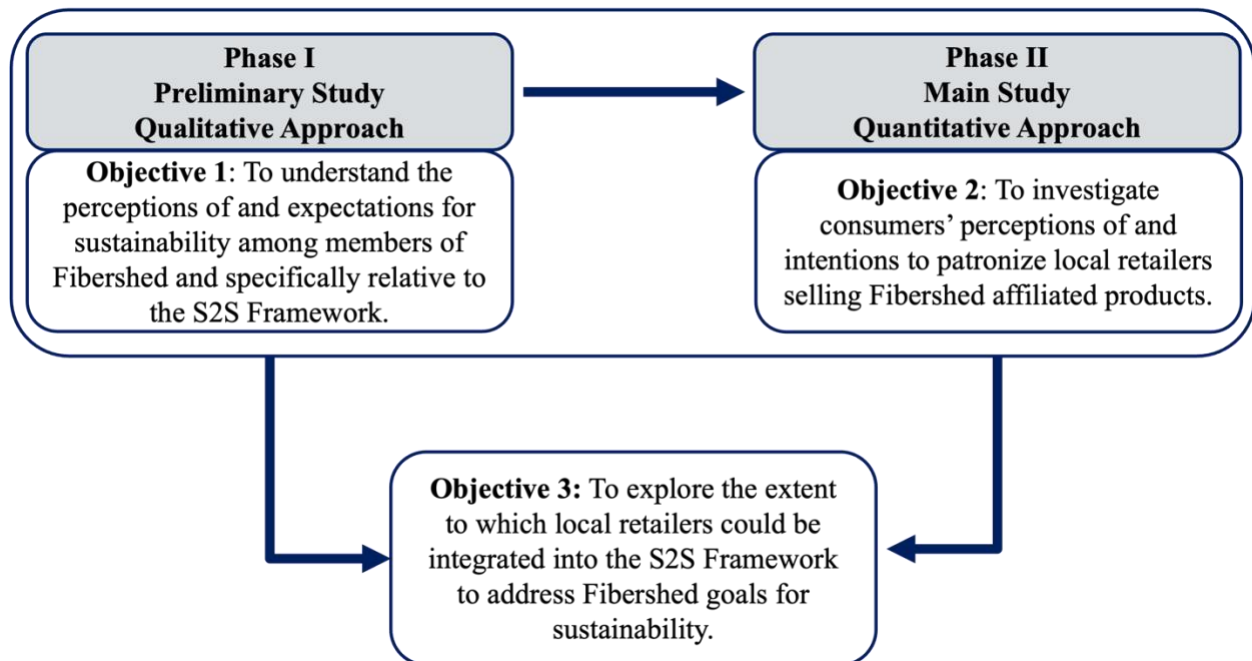
Although Fibershed is an organization that exists beyond the Internet and is therefore largely defined by its offline activities, it does have a significant online and social media presence. According to Kozinets (2010), studying a community's digital presence can reveal important aspects of its wider focal community or culture, and online communications provide information about the social elements of its participants, such as their values, beliefs, and behaviors. To this point, observation data was collected from the Fibershed website and netnographic observation of the Twitter feed #fibershed was conducted to outline the overall network and identify the different stakeholder groups involved in the online Fibershed community.

It is important to note that Fibershed is not an exclusively online network. Therefore, in the preliminary study, the digital data were augmented by in-depth interviews conducted with thirteen individual members of the Fibershed community. That is, the netnographic observation helped inform the in-depth interviews with regards to identifying the relevant stakeholders in the Fibershed S2S Framework and shaping the questions asked of them. According to Merriam (1998), the interview method allows for the exploration of an individual's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of a particular phenomenon. As will be further elaborated upon in Chapter III, the purpose of the interviews was to understand the structure of the Fibershed network, the views of the participants on how the network facilitates the process of achieving a sustainable apparel supply chain, and their perceptions of the role the local retailer could play within the network.

Findings from the qualitative data collected in Phase I were then used to inform Phase II of the study. The focus of Phase II (main dissertation data collection) was to examine consumers' perceptions of local retailers engaging in sustainable practices, their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, and subsequently explore of the possibility of

integrating the local retailer into the Fibershed S2S Framework. In Phase II, a survey was used to address the second objective of the dissertation, which was to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. As will be discussed in detail in Chapter III, survey questions were based on a review of the relevant literature and informed by themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected in Phase I. A framework that provides the basis for examination of the factors that influence consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products was tested. Finally, based on findings from Phase II and the results of the Phase I qualitative study, the third objective of the study - to explore the integration of the local retailer in the Fibershed S2S Framework - was addressed through the discussion of the findings relative to the theoretical framework guiding the study. Figure 5 illustrates the overall research design.

Figure 5. Research Design



Scope and Significance

Prior research has examined large brands and/or chain store retailers to assess characteristics of sustainable retail practices. However, very few studies have examined the role of the local retailer in terms of sustainability. Likewise, there are no studies to date that have considered the role of the retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework. By examining the concept of sustainability relative to Fibershed and sustainable retailing relative to local retailers, results of this dissertation shed light on the implications of Fibershed for sustainable fashion. Further, the results have implications for understanding how consumers perceive local retailers and identifying factors that influence their patronage of local retailers selling sustainable, and specifically Fibershed affiliated products.

As will be discussed in Chapter II, the findings were interpreted through a conceptual lens that borrowed from the theoretical concept of Social Practice Theory. Engaging in a qualitative phase that approaches the topic from an emic perspective made it possible to gain an in-depth understanding of sustainability of Fibershed among stakeholders of the network. It also allowed for an understanding of what motivates these stakeholders to engage in sustainable practices, as well as their views of what the role of the local retailer should be in the Fibershed S2S Framework. By conducting the quantitative phase to examine consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers, the study gained an etic perspective of the factors that influence consumers to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Through their attitudes and behaviors, consumers play an important role in the adoption and dissemination of sustainable products. The growing emphasis on sustainable consumption reflects recognition of the complex factors shaping consumers' behaviors, including the values inherent in lifestyle choices (Hargreaves, 2011). Social Practice Theory (SPT) is a practice-based

approach to examining individual behaviors based on practical routines embedded in society, rather than individual actions. The focus is shifted away from individual behaviors to social practices, thereby enabling a comprehensive analysis of sustainability issues that considers institutions, norms, and routines (Kennedy et al., 2015). As a result, SPT allows for a comprehensive analysis of sustainable practices within broader socio-cultural contexts, offering insights beyond individual motivations. By considering the wider social practices surrounding the intention to patronize local retailers, this dissertation provides valuable insights into the factors influencing consumers' decisions. Additionally, recognizing the interconnectedness of the various societal factors in terms of institutions and norms, SPT aligns with the dissertation's objective of understanding why consumers might choose to support local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Definition of Key Terms

The following table provides definitions of the key terms used within this dissertation.

Table 1. Definition of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Fast Fashion	Garments that are mass produced in large volumes and are inexpensive, trendy, and sold in chain stores (Fletcher, 2010).
Fibershed	A non-profit organization made up of networks of local small businesses whose aim is to promote climate conducive farming, reconstitute regional manufacturing, create locally focused supply chains, create textiles and garments based on sustainability principles and transparent garment production processes, and connect end users to their apparel sources by way of education (<i>Fibershed</i> , n.d.).
Fibershed Affiliated Products	Products made by independent producers affiliated with Fibershed. These products are made from locally grown materials and involve a mindful approach to production that considers the impacts of production on workers, communities, the environment, and ecosystems. For example, Fibershed

	products can include ready-to-wear garments and accessories, natural dyes, housewares (such as baskets, blankets, pillows, candles, and soaps), and various fibers (such as fleece).
Local Retailer	Typically refers to small-scale retail establishments primarily serving the immediate community and distinct from national chains or large-scale corporations. They support the local economy by hiring local employees and sourcing products from local suppliers (Kim & Stoel, 2010).
Slow Fashion	Based on ethical care in the production and sales process, it encourages the long-term use of products, reduction in the volume of purchases, and advocates the principles of sustainability (McNeill & Snowdon, 2019).
Social Practice Theory	Social Practice Theory is a behavioral analysis theory that frames individuals as carriers of practices, shifting from individual-centric approaches to a broader focus on the practices themselves (Spotswood et al., 2017). Practices emerge, persist, shift, and disappear when connections between the elements of materials, competences, and meanings are made, sustained, or broken (Shove et al., 2012).
Soil-to-Soil- Framework	A Fibershed framework that depicts a process whereby fiber production starts at the farm, and then goes through processing and dyeing to be converted into fabric. Designers and makers subsequently use this fabric to construct garments. Once the lifespan of the garment is complete and it is ready for disposal, it can be composted and returned to the soil (Burgess & White, 2019).
Sustainability	Development that serves the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations (<i>Brundtland Report</i> - United Nations, 1987, para. 55).
Sustainable Fashion	Environmentally sustainable garment sourcing and production processes that are performed locally, provide safe working conditions and fair wages to workers and have a limited carbon footprint (Henninger et al., 2016).
Sustainable Retailing	Retail operations that factor in environmental and social impacts, from raw material acquisition to product use and disposal, and from the safety and well-being of workers to that of society as a whole (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021).

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter I began with the statement of the research problem and included the background of the study. Research gaps, purpose and objectives, the research design, and scope and significance were outlined. Definitions of key terms were provided.

Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of literature related to the topic. The theoretical foundations of the study are addressed, the conceptual model is explained, and hypotheses developed to test the model are presented.

Chapter III delineates the research methodology and provides a detailed discussion of the two phases of the research design. First the results of the preliminary qualitative study used to design the survey instrument are presented. Then details regarding the second phase, an empirical survey-based study designed to investigate the effects of consumer values and awareness on their perceptions and intentions are provided. The research design, including data collection methods and anticipated statistical approaches used for data analysis, are discussed.

Chapter IV presents the data analysis and results of Phase II of the dissertation, including description of sample and responses, measurement model, structural equation model analysis, and hypothesis testing. The chapter concludes with a summary of the results of each hypothesis.

Chapter V begins with a discussion of the major findings of Phase I and Phase II of the study, followed by conclusions based on these major findings. Theoretical and practical implications are outlined, followed by discussions of the limitations of the dissertation, as well as suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, a review of the literature pertinent to the study is presented, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework employed and the conceptual model developed. The hypotheses are then presented. To this end, this chapter contains the following sections: (1) The Global Apparel Supply Chain; (2) Sustainable Retailing; (3) Sustainable Apparel Consumption; (4) Social Practice Theory; (5) Conceptual Model; (6) Hypothesis Development; and (7) Summary.

The Global Apparel Supply Chain

Fashion is a global industry that involves a diverse network of large and small businesses engaged in designing, manufacturing, and marketing textiles, clothing, and related fashion products for consumers worldwide (Burns et al., 2016). Central to this industry is the apparel supply chain, where a complex network of organizations and activities move products from raw materials to the end consumer. The supply chain involves a long series of production and distribution activities, from fiber spinning to apparel retailing (Burns et al., 2016; Su & Gargeya, 2011). For the purpose of this dissertation, and to provide an overall context for the research, in the following sections, literature on the supply chain within the apparel and textile industry, the differences between fast fashion and slow fashion, and the components of the supply chain, with a particular focus on Fibershed, is presented.

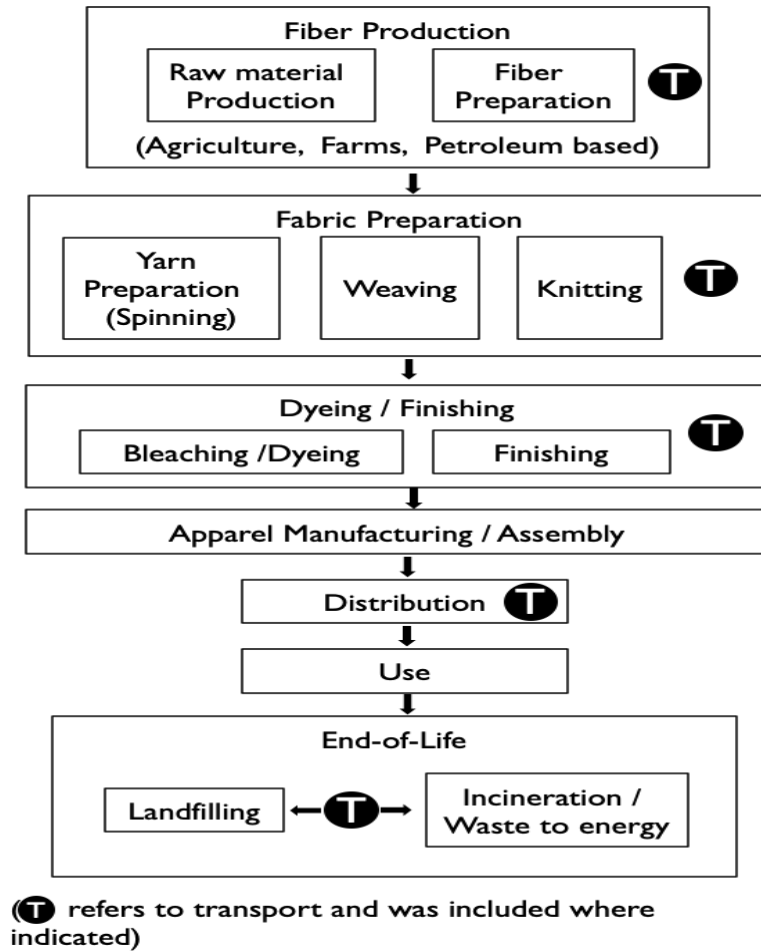
The Supply Chain Process

As discussed briefly in Chapter I, the global fashion industry generates revenues in excess of \$1.7 trillion in retail sales dollars (Fashion United, n.d.) and employs over 300 million workers worldwide (Euromonitor International, 2021). Within the fashion industry, the apparel and textile

sector, contributing 2% to global GDP (Vilaca, 2022), plays a crucial role due to the complex and extensive supply chain involved (Ashby et al., 2013). The intricate structure of the industry is demonstrated by the numerous links in the chain, the variety of operations, the dispersion of the market, and the breadth of product and range of quality (Su & Gargeya, 2011). To achieve efficiency and gain competitive advantage, retailers and brands must arrange their entire supply chains to ensure that the right products are delivered at the right time and place (Burns et al., 2016).

According to Mentzer et al. (2006), a “supply chain is defined as a set of three or more entities (organizations or individuals) directly involved in the upstream and downstream flows of products, services, finances, and/or information from a source to a customer” (p. 4). These entities consist of many independent firms that are involved in different manufacturing stages of finished apparel, including producers of raw materials and related components, product assemblers, wholesalers, retailers, transport and logistics companies, companies that provide financial and other assistance, and channels that assist the flow of information (Burns et al., 2016; Mentzer et al., 2006). Each organization is dependent on the others to successfully manage the overall supply chain (Christopher, 2011). Figure 6 illustrates the life cycle of the global apparel system and the various supply chain processes that are involved.

Figure 6. Lifecycle of the Global Apparel System and its Supply Chain



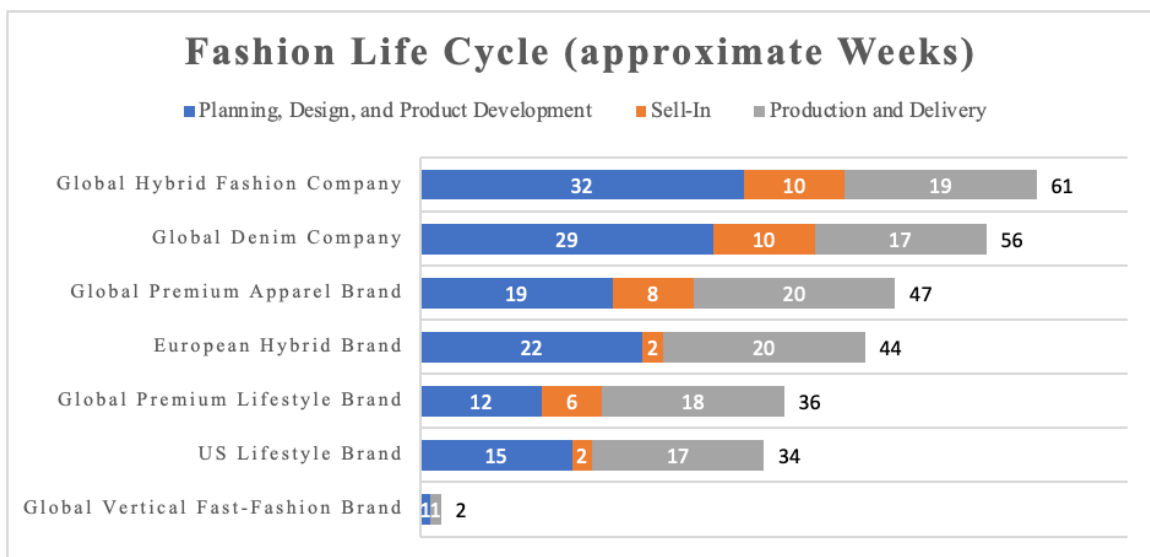
Note: Adapted from *The life cycle of the global apparel system* by Chrobot et al. (2018).

As explicated by Chrobot et al. (2018), the global apparel supply chain begins with the extraction and processing of fibers. These fibers can be natural, such as cotton, wool, and silk, or synthetic, such as polyester and nylon. Raw materials are then transported from the extraction stage to the processing stage. The fabric preparation stage involves the preparation of yarn, where the fibers are spun into yarn using different spinning techniques and then transported to the next stage of fabric processing. In this stage, the yarn is knitted or woven into fabric using different techniques. The fabric is then transported to the next stage, dyeing and finishing, which

includes bleaching, dyeing, and finishing the fabric. The finished fabric is then transported to the manufacturing / assembly facilities where it is cut and sewn into apparel products. These finished products are then distributed to retail stores for sale to the end users. The use phase of the cycle involves the consumers' use and care of apparel products. Finally, in the end-of-life process of the apparel cycle, the garments are transported to the landfill or incinerated.

With so many processes involved at each stage of the apparel lifecycle, the type of supply chain adopted by a retailer is determined by its business model and product assortment needs (Berg et al., 2018). Retailers vary in strategy, with fast fashion brands employing different supply chains than those following traditional fashion cycles (Burns et al., 2016). Diverse business models adopt distinct production lifecycles, ranging from 61 weeks for global hybrid fashion companies to two weeks for vertically integrated fast fashion brands, as depicted in Figure 7 (Berg et al., 2018). The duration of the fashion cycle impacts supply chain strategies. For instance, the supply chain strategy of a two-week cycle in fast fashion contrasts with a 47-week cycle for a global premium apparel brand (Berg et al., 2018).

Figure 7. End-to-End Fashion Cycle Duration Based on Business Model



Note: Adapted from The duration of an end-to-end fashion cycle widely varies by company, by Berg et al. (2018).

Fast Fashion

As discussed in the previous section, the supply chain strategy that a business adopts depends on whether the company follows a traditional fashion or fast fashion business model.

Fast fashion is a business model that is based on providing consumers with novelty items that are low-priced, trendy, and mass produced in large volumes (Fletcher, 2010; Niinimaki et al., 2020).

In the modern world, globalization and the democratization of fashion has made the latest fashion trends available to all classes of consumers at low prices (Bick et al., 2018; Gabrielli et al., 2013; Thomas, 2019), leading to the increased demand for inexpensive fashion products at a rapid pace (Bick et al., 2018). The consumer-driven demand for fast fashion has led to the rapid growth of fast fashion retailers seeking to source their products from countries with low production costs and faster delivery terms (Niinimaki et al., 2020; Turker & Altuntas, 2014). The fast fashion model's emphasis on responsiveness overlooks ethical, employment, and environmental concerns, creating sustainability challenges and significant human and environmental costs (Fletcher, 2010; Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009; Turker & Altuntas, 2014), a few of which are discussed in the following sections.

Environmental Impact of Fast Fashion. As the word *fast* in fast fashion suggests, the process involves the rapid movement of products from the runway to the sales floor to meet changing style demands on a weekly, or even daily, basis (Bick et al., 2018; Wren, 2022). To meet the rapid demand for new products, brands have established supply chains predominantly in developing nations that produce large quantities of cellulose and petroleum-based synthetic

fabrics (i.e., polyester) that contribute to substantial greenhouse gas emissions, landfill waste, and environmental degradation (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2008; Wren, 2022).

Fast fashion has now become synonymous with over-production and over-consumption. For instance, polyester production has increased nine-fold within the past five decades, and this low-cost fiber has allowed the apparel industry to keep producing volumes of inexpensive clothes with little consideration of durability (Changing Markets Foundation, 2021; Niinimäki et al., 2020). In the past two decades, this situation has resulted in consumers buying 60% more apparel products and using these products half as long (Changing Markets Foundation, 2021). Consequently, fast fashion apparel is considered ‘disposable’ (Claudio, 2007) creating a ‘throwaway consumer culture’ (Reimann, 2023, p. 12). Consumers’ pursuit of inexpensive clothing has created enormous volumes of waste as well as microfibers that release toxins and carbon in volumes more than the planet has the capacity to absorb (EMF, 2017). In fact, 87% of the materials in the apparel supply chain either end up in landfills or are incinerated (Changing Markets Foundation, 2021). Moreover, overstock resulting from luxury goods and representing an average of 3% of the total stock, are incinerated to prevent them from being sold at discounted prices (Changing Markets Foundation, 2021). According to Changing Markets Foundation (2021), numerous heavy metals, acid gasses, and other harmful emissions released during the burning have been linked to a number of malignancies, birth defects, lung and respiratory conditions, strokes, and cardiovascular diseases.

Social Impact of Fast Fashion. Fast fashion's environmental degradation is inseparable from its impact on human life, particularly the exploitation of garment workers. The collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh in 2013 highlighted worker exploitation, a reflection of offshoring to nations with lower safety standards (Bick et al., 2018; Saxena, 2019). Apparel manufacturing, a

labor-intensive industry, often subjects workers in low-cost countries to poor working conditions, encompassing low wages, extended work hours, and hazardous environments (Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019; Kumar, 2021), perpetuating human rights violations, health risks, and environmental harm (Ting & Stagner, 2023). In some cases, governments have disregarded labor issues in order to procure the business of international retailers and to try to prevent them from moving their production to other low-cost countries (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017; Saxena, 2019).

Another social aspect of apparel and textile manufacturing, seen primarily in Asian countries like China, Vietnam, India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Bangladesh, involves violence against women, aged 18 to 35, who constitute the majority of the industry's workforce (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Normalized violence against women on the production floor, known as "mining of the body," involves sexual abuses and severe industrial punitive practices (Bhattacharjee, 2019; Nathan et al., 2022). Similarly, illegal and unethical practices like child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking are also prevalent in the apparel and textile global supply chain (Allwood et al., 2006; ILO, 2019).

The migration of manufacturing jobs to low-cost countries has also adversely affected the labor and economic conditions in the countries that the manufacturing processes have moved out of (Hodges & Frank, 2013). Although the US contributes to 20% of global apparel sales, just 2.5% of consumed apparel is domestically produced (Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019). Historically, the textile industry in regions like the Mid-Atlantic and Southern United States played a crucial role in local economies (Clarke-Sather & Cobb, 2019; Zingraff, 1991) and in several communities across the United States, apparel and textile manufacturing were the predominant industry (Hodges & Karpova, 2016). However, due to increasing costs and competition, many

manufacturing plants have closed, impacting communities reliant on these industries, and causing job losses and a declining standard of living (Hodges & Lentz, 2010).

The negative environmental, social, and human impacts of fast fashion have been significant and far-reaching. The industry is linked to several serious issues, including environmental degradation, worker exploitation, child labor, gender inequality, and forced labor (Kumar, 2021). Diverse sections of the population are gradually becoming aware of the effect of the consumption of fast fashion, and some are trying to embrace a more sustainable and ethical approach to clothing. Some are moving towards slow fashion and manufacturing processes that consider ecological and social factors, focusing on small scale production, local materials and markets, and traditional craft techniques, similar to the slow food movement (Fletcher, 2010).

The market for sustainable fashion has seen remarkable expansion in recent years, with projections indicating continued growth in the future. According to the Business Research Company (2024), the ethical fashion sector is predicted to grow from \$8.17 billion to \$8.83 billion between 2023 and 2024, achieving an eight percent compound annual growth rate (CAGR). Moreover, the sustainable segment of the apparel market is projected to experience a consistent increase in its global revenue share from 2023 to 2026, with forecasts indicating that by 2026, the share will have risen for three years in a row, reaching 6.14 % (Statista, 2023). Furthermore, the ethical fashion market is forecasted to reach \$12.05 billion by 2028, maintaining a CAGR of 8.1% during the forecast period (The Business Research Company, 2024). This growth can be attributed to various factors, including the emergence of new markets, a rise in foreign investments, government regulations and initiatives, increasing consumer awareness of the environmental impacts of fast fashion, and increasing interest in sustainable fashion. Evolving consumer preferences are driving this growth, with a significant majority of

consumers emphasizing the importance of sustainability, environmental responsibility, and "clean" products when making purchasing decisions (Haller et al., 2020; The Business Research Company, 2024). Additionally, a substantial portion of consumers are willing to adapt their buying habits to minimize environmental harm, with an even higher percentage who prioritize sustainability (Haller et al., 2020). As consumers increasingly adopt alternative consumption models, such as renting and buying second-hand items, the sustainable fashion market is well-equipped to gain a significant share of the overall fashion industry (Haller et al., 2020). This trend underscores the growing significance of sustainability within the apparel industry and highlights the potential for continued growth.

Although data specifically related to the consumption of slow fashion are lacking, it can be reasonably assumed that slow fashion, as a component of the sustainable fashion movement, is also witnessing increased consumer interest and market growth potential, given the overall expansion of the ethical and sustainable fashion market. The next section presents the literature on slow fashion, a sustainable and ethical approach to apparel and textile manufacturing with the potential to mitigate some of the problems caused by fast fashion.

Slow Fashion

Increasingly disillusioned with growth-obsessed practices and the fast fashion industry, consumers are embracing a paradigm shift, showing a growing appreciation for slower forms of culture (Fletcher, 2010; Harrison, 2018; Joy et al., 2012). Often, this shift has assumed a form of social movement, where anti-consumption activists urge consumers to deliberate on the impact of their purchases. Advocating for mindful consumption, these movements encourage individuals to question the necessity, ethicality, and sustainability of the products and services they buy

(Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Movements like slow fashion and the *Great American Apparel Diet* that promote voluntary simplicity in fashion are now emerging (McNeill & Snowdon, 2019).

Slow fashion, a concept envisioned by journalist Kate Fletcher, aligns with ethical and sustainable principles akin to the slow food movement, which promotes long-term product use and reduced overall consumption (Fletcher, 2008; McNeill & Snowdon, 2019). Slow fashion is defined as a movement of artisans, designers, sellers, and manufacturers, that, in response to fast fashion and globalization, have established manufacturing processes that concentrate on producing items with intrinsic value, creating unique customer experiences, and lessening the environmental footprint (Thomas, 2019). As mentioned above, slow fashion's philosophy is borrowed from and aligns with the slow food movement. The slow food concept, founded in 1986 by Carlo Petrini in Italy, combines pleasure and food with individuals' awareness and responsibility (Fletcher, 2008). The slow food movement strives for biodiversity in the food supply by challenging standardization of taste, advocating for consumers' need for information on what they eat, and protecting the cultural identity of food (Fletcher, 2008). Similarly, the slow fashion philosophy considers the needs of the different stakeholders involved in the fashion cycle, including designers, buyers, retailers, and consumers, as well as the impact it has on workers, consumers, and the environment (Joy et al., 2012).

To better understand what slow fashion is, it is necessary to explicate what slow fashion is not. Slow fashion is not simply the fast fashion process but without the harmful elements (Fletcher, 2010). As Fletcher (2007) succinctly puts it, "Slow is not the opposite of fast - there is no dualism - but a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers' communities and ecosystems" (para. 5). Slow fashion is a movement that does not relate to the speed of production, but instead refers to "a

different worldview that names a coherent set of fashion activity that promotes variety and multiplicity of fashion production and consumption and that celebrates the pleasure and cultural significance of fashion within biophysical limits” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 262). Distinguishing itself from the fast-paced fashion industry, slow fashion is not just about production speed, but involves a mindful approach by all stakeholders to the industry’s impact on workers, communities, and ecosystems (Joy et al., 2012). Emphasizing local resources, transparent production, and quality over quantity, slow fashion promotes sustainable practices while fostering respect for tradition and artisans (Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010; Jung & Jin, 2016).

Beyond the temporal slowdown, slow fashion places importance on artisans, originality, versatility, and craftsmanship, and respects tradition while encouraging the use of modern technology for efficient and cleaner methods of production (Fletcher, 2008; Langdown, 2014; Thomas, 2019). An important aspect of slow fashion is the systems thinking approach, where local businesses and communities are considered, consumption slows down to allow for the earth’s natural regenerative processes to take place, and people are treated with respect, provided safe working conditions, and fair wages (Cataldi et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2008; Langdown, 2014; Thomas, 2019). The movement towards slow fashion has inspired organizations like Fibershed, the focus of this dissertation, that represent localized, transparent, and more sustainable apparel and textile production systems.

Fibershed

As introduced in Chapter I, Fibershed is a growing movement focused on uniting producers with users that aims to foster sustainable textile and garment production. Similar to a local watershed or foodshed, Fibershed operates as a place-based textile system within specific geographical boundaries, emphasizing raw material sources, transparent garment production, and

interconnectivity among contributors throughout the soil-to-soil process (Burgess & White, 2019). Fibershed endeavors to facilitate climate-friendly farming, revitalize regional manufacturing, establish local supply chains, and educate consumers about the origins of their apparel (Fibershed, n.d.). Founded in 2010 by Rebecca Burgess, this non-profit organization comprises networks of farmers and local businesses dedicated to reconfiguring local infrastructures for processing raw materials, particularly wool, and transforming them into high-quality garments (Pogson, 2022).

The concept of Fibershed was conceived when Rebecca Burgess challenged herself to decrease her reliance on fossil fuels and set out on a journey to create a "soil-to-soil wardrobe" by seeking only apparel made within a 150-mile radius of her home (Burgess & White, 2019). Fibershed represents a similarly holistic approach to textile production taking place within defined regions and revolving around reducing the textile industry's environmental impact, advancing sustainability, bolstering local economies, and fostering producer-consumer connections (Fibershed, n.d.; Trejo et al., 2019). As Roshitsh (2022) notes, "The organization [Fibershed] showcases how localism plays out on a global stage, tracing the soil origins of its certified-Climate Beneficial wool, or wool sourced from specially developed regional textile economies that promote carbon drawdown" (p. 7).

Aligned with slow fashion principles, Fibershed embodies the essence of slow fashion by emphasizing local sourcing, regenerative practices, ethical production, and community welfare, fostering a harmonious relationship between fashion and environmental responsibility (Daniels, 2019; Miller et al., 2022). Fibershed champions natural fibers, discourages synthetics, advocates for quality over quantity in garment consumption, and promotes garment longevity (Fibershed, n.d.). Moreover, the climate-friendly agricultural practices of Fibershed have sequestered

significant carbon dioxide equivalents and introduced beneficial wool into production systems, promoting ecosystem restoration (Fibershed, n.d.; Roshitsh, 2022).

Fibershed also encourages economic growth while ensuring social equity and justice by advocating for fair labor practices, transparent supply chains, and community engagement (The New School Parsons, n.d.). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Fibershed mobilized local networks to support communities, highlighting its commitment to communal welfare (Fibershed, 2020). Emphasizing the historical and cultural context in materials and cultivation processes, Fibershed fosters inclusivity in collaboration with local communities (Wilkes, 2023). Ultimately, Fibershed aspires to transform the fashion industry into a more ethical and sustainable business model overall.

Fibershed products, though infrequently available through regular retail channels, can often be found at farmers' markets, where customers can directly engage with local producers and learn about the stories behind their garments (Fibershed, n.d.). Fibershed therefore operates primarily on the direct-to-consumer model. For example, individuals who are involved with Fibershed get notifications and invitations to local Fibershed events, where they can buy Fibershed affiliated products (Local Cloth, n.d.). Fibershed also organizes special events, such as pop-up shops and workshops, where attendees can purchase unique, handcrafted items while participating in educational activities (Fibershed, n.d.). Additionally, the Fibershed Regional Source Book webpage provides information on the list of regionally grown textiles and where to buy them (Fibershed Regional Source Book, n.d.). Lastly, the designers and affiliate members have their own websites and sell Fibershed products through those online sales portals, or through online shopping portals like Etsy. Details of these members can be found through the Fibershed Affiliate Directory (Fibershed Affiliate Directory, n.d.).

Since its inception in 2013, Fibershed has grown to seventy affiliate network members internationally (Fibershed, 2023). Since 2017, the Fibershed organization has granted over \$231,000 in grants to 83 projects as a part of their micro-grant program (Fibershed, 2023). Over 599 climate beneficial carbon farming practices have been implemented by Fibershed members since the program began in 2016, and in 2023, over 1 million pounds of cotton were grown using sustainable farming methods (Fibershed, 2023). With funding from the USDA as a part of their Climate-Smart Commodities Grant, Fibershed expects to capture 3 million metric tons of carbon emissions over 20 years (Fibershed, 2023). In terms of advocacy, Fibershed has conducted 36 workshops at its Learning Center in 2023 with over 370 students enrolled and 47 scholarships provided (Fibershed, 2023). Fibershed has seen a considerable increase in their email and social media followers over the years, with two of their social media campaigns gaining over 40,000 impressions in 2023 (Fibershed, 2023).

The significant growth and impact of Fibershed over the past decade has demonstrated the organization's potential to drive meaningful change in the textile industry. This is evidenced by the expansion of its affiliate network, substantial grant funding, implementation of sustainable agricultural practices, and successful advocacy and educational efforts (Fibershed, 2023). Given Fibershed's role in promoting the adoption of regional, sustainable, and climate-beneficial fiber practices, as well as its advocacy and education related to sustainable production and consumption practices, this dissertation is important for exploring Fibershed as a sustainable apparel and textile supply chain alternative.

One of Fibershed's strategies for sustainability involves a closed-loop supply chain known as the soil-to-soil (S2S) framework. Rooted in McDonough et. al.'s (2003) cradle-to-cradle concept, the S2S Framework operates within a circular supply chain, enhancing the

understanding of closed-loop systems in textile production (LeHew et al., 2022). To explore the concept further, the next section discusses the linear and circular supply chain models in general, followed by a detailed discussion of the Fibershed S2S Framework in particular.

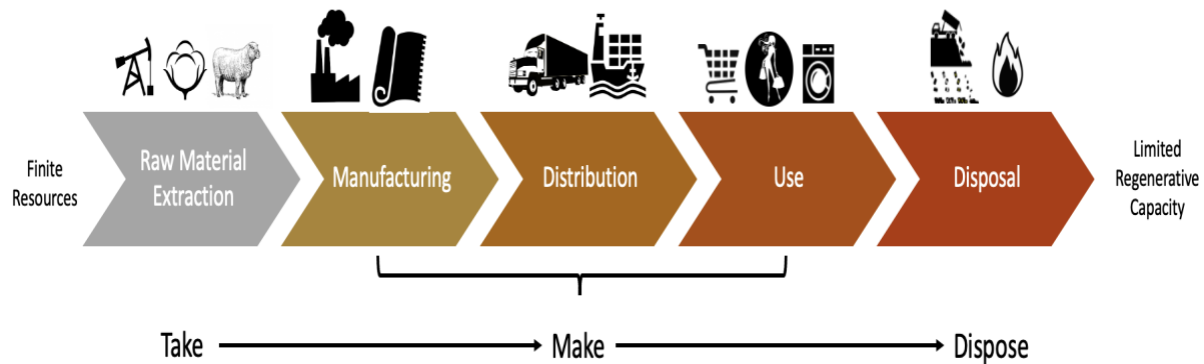
Linear vs Closed Loop Supply Chain Models

The global apparel and textile supply chain is intricate, involving diverse processes in manufacturing and distribution that are managed across fragmented markets and with varying product specifications (Christopher, 2011; Su & Gargeya, 2011). Typically, the supply chain encompasses models that are either centered on extraction, production, consumption, and disposal, or models that are more sustainable or circular, focusing on repair, reuse, remanufacture, and recycling (Brydges, 2021). The former is known as a linear system and the latter as a circular system.

Linear Systems

Per Ley et al. (2021), the apparel industry supply chain is based on the key steps that are undertaken: raw material procurement based on cultivation and extraction from plants, animals, or earth; raw material processing into yarn and intermediary products; production and finishing of materials that are components of finished products; assembly and manufacturing of finished products; and other corporate functions not involved in the production process. Globalization and intense competition have made these supply chains complex, pushing many brands to offshore manufacturing while retaining core design activities domestically (Ashby, 2018). This shift to overseas production follows a resource-heavy 'take, make, dispose' pattern, burdening the environment, straining resources, and causing market volatility (EMF, 2017; Miller et al., 2022, Niinimäki, 2017). Figure 8 depicts the linear supply chain model that characterizes the take, make, dispose pattern of the traditional apparel supply chain.

Figure 8. Cradle to Grave or Linear Supply Chain Model



Note. Recreated based on a figure by Wautelet (2018) titled “The linear economy – The ‘take, make, waste’ approach of production.”

The initial 'take' stage involves gathering raw materials for making textiles and apparel, followed by the 'make' stage where these materials are turned into products distributed to consumers. Once used, these products enter the 'dispose' stage, ending up in landfills or being incinerated. Known as the cradle-to-grave system, this linear model characterizes modern manufacturing and is at the root of material waste culture (Brydges, 2021; EMF, 2017; McDonough et al., 2003). The environmental impacts of the apparel and textile industry, particularly related to the usage of natural resources, chemicals, and the resultant waste and pollution generated by it at the make stage have drawn criticism from several sources (Ashby, 2018). Sandvik and Stubbs (2019) warn that continued use of the model will ultimately deplete ecosystem resources, worsen material scarcity due to climate change, and strain food supply resources. Such a system also heightens risks of supply chain disruptions for companies (EMF, 2017). To counter these issues, and ultimately move away from resource-dependent models, circular economies and closed-loop supply chains are being put forward as better alternatives.

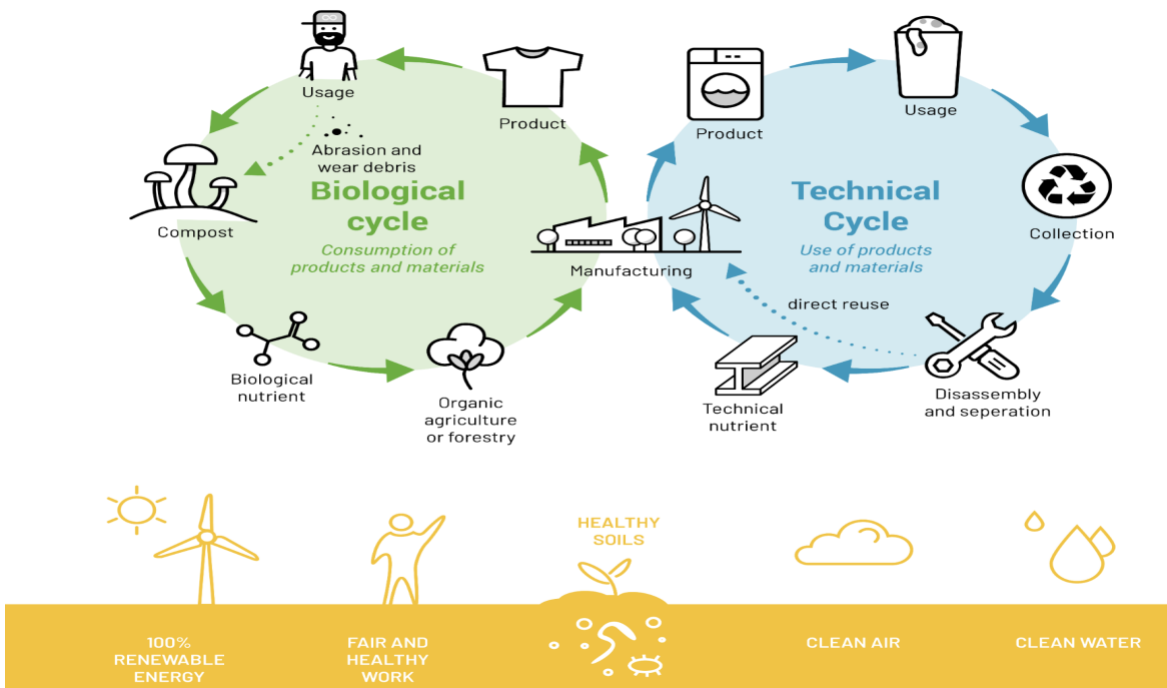
Circular Systems

The heightened threat of increased consumption for the Earth's natural resources has underscored the importance of resource reuse (EMF, 2017). In response, governments and organizations have enacted legislations, like extended producer responsibility laws, and incentivized practices, such as reverse logistics, to promote circular economic models (Ley et al., 2021; Sandvik & Stubbs, 2019). Firms, aiming to reduce environmental impact, are being mandated to monitor and minimize environmental effects throughout their supply chains (Ashby, 2018). Within a circular industrial economy, emphasis is placed on renewable energy, efficient resource utilization, and deliberate design to minimize waste (EMF, 2017). To this end, Sandvik and Stubbs (2019) underscored the conversion of textile waste into reusable resources through reverse logistics, integrating repair, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, and recycling into supply chains to foster closed-loop systems. These systems enhance environmental, economic, and social sustainability by reclaiming use and value from unwanted items (Muhwati & Salisbury, 2022).

By bridging production and consumption activities and creating closed-loop systems, sustainable business models can sever the link between economic growth and environmental degradation caused by traditional linear supply chain models (Brydges, 2021). Circular businesses seek to decouple profit growth from material consumption, and instead of buying new products, consumers are encouraged to opt for services like repairs, upgrades, or remanufacturing. To this end, retailers can engage in initiatives like garment takeback programs, clothing swaps, clothing libraries, repair services, second-hand shopping, and material recycling to promote fiber reclamation, thereby reducing demand for new materials and fostering closed-loop systems (Allwood et al., 2006; Brydges, 2021).

According to McDonough et al. (2003), benign and sustainable closed-loop systems can be designed such that materials with biological nutrients like fiber, textiles, and packaging composed of natural fibers can be safely biodegraded and used for restoring depleted soil nutrients. Materials with technical nutrients like synthetic carpet yarns can be depolymerized and repolymerized repeatedly and used as ingredients of synthetic products to keep them in circulation for a longer time (McDonough et al., 2003). Figure 9 illustrates the cradle-to-cradle supply chain model, distinguishing between biological and technical material flows. The biological cycle features environmentally friendly materials that can safely return to the soil after use (McDonough et al., 2003). The technical cycle reuses materials to prevent landfill accumulation. Once the items are produced, used, and reach the end-of-life cycle, these products are broken down and reused as raw materials for new products and therefore kept out of landfills (McDonough et al., 2003).

Figure 9. Cradle-to-Cradle Supply Chain Model



Note: A Concept by McDonough et al. (2003). Illustration by Felix Muller

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The Cradle-to-Cradle or closed loop supply chain system, when adopted, has the advantage of eliminating useless and potentially harmful waste, providing savings in the form of raw material costs over a period of time, as well as diminishing the need for new raw materials because of the practice of reusing old materials (McDonough et al., 2003). This idea forms the basis of one aspect of Fibershed, which is the “Soil-to-Soil” (S2S) framework. This framework is a closed-loop supply chain developed based on sustainability values and principles. The following section elaborates on the Fibershed S2S Framework.

Fibershed and the Soil-to-Soil Framework

Research indicates that using natural fibers in production extends product lifespans, encouraging sustainable practices like usage for longer periods, low-impact care, upcycling, and/or recycling at the end of the product life cycle (Daniels, 2019). Protein fibers derived from animals like sheep, alpaca, or rabbit, and cellulose fibers derived from plants like cotton, hemp, or flax, are considered "fresh carbon," and can revitalize soil while supporting local farmers and artisans (Burgess & White, 2019, Daniels, 2019). Embracing slow fashion principles, textile and apparel stakeholders in the S2S Framework are focused on crafting items with higher value, enhancing customer experiences, worker welfare, and minimizing environmental impact (Fletcher, 2010). The process is designed to promote fundamental changes at personal, social, and institutional levels, giving due recognition to local artisans, craftspeople, and respecting local traditions, while at the same time, integrating modern technology to boost efficiency and reduce pollution (Burgess & White, 2019; EMF, 2017; Fletcher, 2010). Through the S2S Framework, Fibershed advocates a localized, transparent, and sustainable approach to garment

production, emphasizing natural material sourcing and network connectivity (Burgess & White, 2019; LeHew et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022).

Defined by a particular region, Fibershed makes use of the natural, social, and physical resources available in that specific geographical area to produce garments (Burgess & White, 2019; Fibershed, n.d.). As a result, the S2S Framework is a closed-loop system, whereby the process of fiber production starts at the farm/ranch and goes through different stages of production and consumption, to ultimately be composted and returned to the soil. The Fibershed S2S Framework, as depicted in Figure 4 (see p.11), illustrates the links in the value chain of a regional Fibershed.

In the S2S Framework, fiber production starts in the form of animal protein or plant cellulose fibers, and then goes through processing and dyeing to be converted into fabric. Designers and makers subsequently use this fabric to construct garments. Once the lifespan of the garment is complete and it is ready for disposal, it can be composted and returned to the soil (Burgess & White, 2019). Elaborating on the S2S Framework, the Fibershed model encourages the process of producing place-based, climate-friendly fiber by encouraging farmers to adopt climate beneficial regenerative agricultural practices. Regenerative agriculture in rangelands and farmlands are farming practices that help restore and maintain nature's self-renewal ability and assist in the enhancement of atmospheric carbon capture by acting as carbon sinks. The plants and animals on the farm get their nutrients from this soil and convert the carbon into different types of fibers - cellulose fibers such as cotton, jute, bamboo, or hemp, and protein fibers such as wool, angora, or mohair from animals such as sheep, rabbits, and alpacas. The farms are also a source of natural dyes that are used to dye the fibers. These fibers then undergo processing, including cleaning, carding, ginning, and dyeing, and are then spun into yarn or woven or knitted

into fabric at the processing mills within the specific geographical area. Next, designers and apparel makers from within the local Fibershed source the textiles to design, cut, and sew them into garments, which are then sold to consumers who use them. Once garments reach the end-of-life stage, they are composted with other organic matter and gently decompose. The compost is returned to the soil during the process of farming and the soil-to-soil cycle is complete, starts again and becomes regenerative (Burgess & White, 2019).

The S2S Framework of Fibershed is not only a sustainable alternative to the current linear supply chain model but is also an example of how businesses can use strategic resources to create a competitive advantage while protecting the environment and strengthening local communities (Burgess & White, 2019). Moreover, by using a place-based approach, Fibershed helps promote person-product attachments and assists consumers to make decisions that hold significance and meaning for them, such as mindful consumption behaviors and the importance of keeping their local community in mind when consuming (Miller et al., 2022). However, in order for consumers to access products produced in the S2S Framework, retailers must be a part of the cycle, hence the focus of this dissertation.

The Role of Retailers and Consumers

As discussed earlier in the chapter, the textile and apparel supply chain is complex, characterized by a variety of operations, numerous links between organizations, dispersion of markets, and the breadth of product and quality (Su & Gargeya, 2011). Ashby et al. (2013) have delineated the garment supply chain into seven stages, as illustrated in Figure 10. The first stage is fiber production, which entails the growing, harvesting, and cleaning of fibers. Spinning is the second stage, where the fibers are processed into yarn. In the third stage, the yarn is woven or knitted into cloth. Fabric finishing and dyeing make up the fourth stage. In the fifth

stage of manufacturing, the fabric is converted to clothes. These clothes then make their way to retailers in the sixth stage and include the process of marketing and distribution of the apparel products. Finally, in the seventh stage, consumers purchase and use the apparel products. Thus, the retail–consumer interface in the supply chain is critical for the adoption of sustainable consumption (Ashby et al., 2013).

Figure 10. Key Levels of the Apparel Supply Chain



Note: Adapted from Ashby et al. (2013).

For the purpose of this dissertation, the investigation will concentrate on Level 6, distribution, where *retailers* play a role in the marketing and selling of apparel products, and Level 7, consumption, where *consumers* are the drivers of the entire supply chain and for whom the end product is intended. Retailers take a wide variety of forms, from traditional, independent clothing outlets dedicated to end-consumer sales, to large specialized or brand-dominated corporate retail firms actively involved in all aspects of the apparel supply chain, including design conception as well as final sale to end user (Kotler & Keller, 2016; Vecchi & Buckley 2016). The following sections elaborate on Level 6, the role of retailers in the apparel supply chain, and Level 7, delineating consumers as the end users shaping the entirety of the apparel supply chain process. Understanding consumer behaviors, preferences, and influences is instrumental to comprehending the dynamics that govern the apparel industry supply chain as a whole.

The Retailer

Retailing is defined as the set of activities involved in selling goods or services to the final consumer for their personal use, and any business whose primary source of revenue is retailing is referred to as a “retailer” or “retail store” (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Retail transactions can occur in diverse settings, such as physical stores, online platforms (including smart devices), mail or telephone orders, and even vending machines (Kotler & Keller, 2016). In today's competitive market, retailers offer not only products but also services and enhanced shopping experiences. Examples include bookstores incorporating coffee shops and gas stations hosting food stores. Additionally, retailers often utilize "pop-up" stores, open for short periods in high-traffic locations, to promote their brands (Burns et al., 2016).

Retailers have historically focused on core retailing functions like operating physical stores, supplier and consumer interaction, and managing warehouses (Muthu, 2017). However, in today's global apparel and textile industry, retailers serve as crucial links between producers and consumers, going beyond just product distribution, to assume multifaceted roles and assist in enhancing supply chain efficiency, sustainability, and effectiveness (Jones et al., 2005). Actively involved in the supply chain process, retailers shape product supply chain dynamics and influence consumer behavior, and therefore are no longer simply intermediaries between producers and consumers (Christopher, 2011; Mentzer et al., 2006).

Retailers wield significant influence in sourcing products aligned with consumer tastes and market trends. That is, retailers scrutinize suppliers, negotiate contracts, and set product standards to meet target audience expectations (Jones et al., 2005; Mentzer et al., 2006). Some retailers act as intermediaries, while others actively drive production and consumer demand by carefully selecting brands and styles, introducing innovative products, and shaping consumer

behavior (Jones et al., 2005; Muthu, 2017). The retailer contributes essential consumer data to manufacturers, enabling agile adjustments to production plans, inventory levels, and rapid responses to market shifts (Mentzer et al., 2006). In some cases, the retailer's influence also extends to imposing conditions on manufacturers, holding substantial power over their processes and overall success (Allwood et al., 2006; Kotler & Keller, 2016). With significant impact on the economy, society, and the environment, retailers can play an important role in promoting sustainable production and consumption patterns (Jones et al., 2005). Last, alongside offering diverse product ranges, retailers set product quality and safety standards, and are uniquely positioned to educate their consumers (Muthu, 2017).

When it comes to sustainability and ethical issues, retailers are in a powerful position to influence change within the industry. As one of the three key stakeholders within the fashion system, alongside manufacturers and consumers, retailers are uniquely placed to implement many strategies, techniques, and approaches in the pursuit of a more sustainable future (Muthu, 2017). To be specific, retailers have the capacity to ensure ethical sourcing, educate consumers on sustainability, and even align practices with specific initiatives like Fibershed, leading to local sourcing, reduced carbon footprints, and greater social equity (Jones et al., 2005).

As the dissertation will highlight, retailers are in a position to align their practices with the principles of Fibershed, and thereby further amplify their impact on sustainability within the industry. Adopting Fibershed initiatives involves a holistic approach in order to source materials locally, reduce carbon footprints, promote social equity and justice, and encourage community engagement. As influential intermediaries in the apparel supply chain, retailers have the power to both promote sustainable sourcing and force suppliers to adopt ethical standards, while teaching consumers about making more deliberate and conscious apparel choices.

The Consumer

According to Su and Gargeya (2011), a supply chain is a complex network of organizations and activities that are part of a whole, the main objective of which is to ensure the delivery of goods and services to the ultimate *consumer*. Consumers are defined as those individuals who buy and use goods and services (Ashby et al., 2013; Mckinsey & Company, 2022). As discussed in a literature review by Bălan (2020), consumers' buying and consumption decisions influence the production strategies, quantities, directions, and costs of the flow of goods within the supply chain.

Consumers play an instrumental role within the apparel supply chain by significantly impacting market dynamics, including sustainability initiatives. Numerous studies emphasize the influential role consumers play in determining their willingness to pay for sustainable apparel (c.f. Hustvedt & Bernard, 2008). Consumer demographics, including gender and ethnicity, impact their attitudes and consumption behaviors, underlining the significance of tailored marketing strategies for diverse consumer segments (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2008). Similarly, consumer engagement in fashion, whether fast fashion or slow, not only reflects their lifestyle and identity choices, but also fosters socialization and community-building, elucidating the broader implications of apparel consumption practices (Gabrielli et al., 2013).

Consumers wield substantial influence in shaping beliefs and knowledge about sustainable brands, which have been found to impact brand preferences and feelings towards environmental causes (Dixit et al., 2020). Likewise, the consumer's overall perspective regarding sustainability can significantly influence their perceptions of retailers' sustainability efforts and, in turn, shape their purchase behaviors (Mauri et al., 2022). The power wielded by consumers underscores the need for retailers to communicate their sustainability initiatives effectively and

to develop a standardized approach for measuring perceived sustainability (Mauri et al., 2022). Moreover, consumers' engagement in slow fashion, circular fashion, and textile-to-textile recycling demonstrates their potential for addressing environmental challenges within the textile and apparel industry (Jung & Jin; 2016; Mostaghel & Chirumalla, 2021; Sandvik & Stubbs, 2019). This engagement can extend to Fibershed as a slow fashion movement that seeks to produce apparel that is ethically made and takes into consideration environmental and social impacts. That is, consumers could play an important role in influencing the extent which retailers seek to promote products emerging from the Fibershed system. This dissertation therefore seeks to understand the links between the consumer and retailer relative to the promotion of Fibershed and the S2S Framework.

In sum, the literature reviewed offers a snapshot of the current state of the art regarding supply chain systems, framing the role of retailers and consumers as important in the dissemination of sustainable apparel and textile production and consumption. However, understanding the role of consumers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions, and, ultimately, intentions and behaviors related to sustainability, is essential to successfully implementing sustainable practices in ways that align with consumer values and contribute to broader environmental and social goals. The sections that follow discuss in detail the literature on the concepts of sustainable retailing and sustainable apparel consumption to identify the constructs that will be examined in this study.

Sustainable Retailing

In this section, literature on the following constructs is examined relative to retailing: (1) commitment to sustainability; and (2) authenticity. Retailers influence not just production, design, and consumption behaviors, but they can also impact sustainability practices (Jones et al.,

2005). Indeed, sustainable retailing, as defined by Vadakkepatt et al. (2021), is retailing that integrates social and environmental impacts throughout the retailing process, including raw material procurement, product lifecycle, employee welfare, and public well-being. For the purpose of this dissertation, *sustainable retailing* encompasses the promotion of a competitive sector while developing the retail workforce, supporting local communities, and enhancing environmental performance through responsible use of natural resources (Acuti et al., 2020).

Sustainable retailing refers to practices whereby retailers seek to reduce emissions and waste through continuously improving internal operations, using responsible/green transportation to move products, and following responsible/green store operations that help to conserve energy, reduce waste, and promote recycling (Yang et al., 2017). The concept encompasses a broad spectrum of initiatives and practices, ranging from adopting green operations and eco-friendly practices within retail operations (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Tang et al., 2016), to creating sustainability-oriented visual atmospherics in stores (Acuti et al., 2020), and understanding consumer motivations and values regarding sustainable fashion (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). According to Acuti et al. (2020), while a clear definition of sustainable retailing is currently in the early stages of development, there are many retailers that are voluntarily addressing environmental and social concerns.

Retailers can serve as gatekeepers in influencing sustainable consumer behavior by highlighting eco-labeling, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and offering sustainable product alternatives (Dodds et al. 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Through ethical sourcing of fair-trade products, adoption of energy conservation, and greenhouse emission reduction measures (Goworek, 2011; Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018), as well as emphasizing private eco-branding and sustainability communication (Kennedy et al., 2016), a sustainable retailer can foster ethical

consumerism and influence consumer perceptions and purchasing intentions. However, challenges persist, such as varying consumer interpretations of sustainability and limited integration of sustainable practices among retailers (Jones et al., 2005; Lehner, 2015; Lundblad & Davies, 2016). Studies have also found that when it comes to sustainable retailing, large retailers are typically more involved in actively addressing sustainability issues, while small retailers usually prioritize economic continuity over sustainability (Jones et al., 2005). In spite of the challenges, sustainable retailing aligns retailer and consumer efforts toward responsible consumption and supply chain practices (Naidoo & Gasparatos, 2018; Yang et al., 2017).

Transitioning from the broader exploration of sustainable retailing, the next few sections will focus on the local retailer, with a review of pertinent literature on the significance of local retailers in fostering engagement at the community level, their attempts at authenticity, and their commitment to sustainable practices. By exploring these dimensions, the dissertation aims to understand how local retailers' community engagement, authenticity, and sustainability initiatives shape consumers' perceptions, specifically by fostering loyalty and increased patronage.

The Local Retailer

The term "local retailer" typically refers to small-scale retail establishments primarily serving the immediate community and distinct from national chains or large-scale corporations. The term can also encompass retailers operating within specific geographic areas, including national boundaries (Kim & Stoel, 2010; Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Studies by Qiu et al. (2023) and Khare (2012) emphasize the integral relationship between local retailers and their communities, highlighting the provision of economic and non-economic benefits to the local ecosystem. These retailers offer personalized services, cater to consumers' needs for specific

items (e.g., fresh food, unique gifts), and foster reciprocal relationships within the community (Khare, 2012; Qiu et al., 2023; Wilson, 2018). According to Kim and Stoel (2010) local retailers are entities that operate within specific communities and place importance on forming relationships with consumers, employees, and the community at large. These retailers tend to offer unique and eclectic product mixes, often customizing products to meet the preferences of their local clientele (Noble et al., 2006). According to Lyson et al. (1995), local retailers can also take the form of artisans, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs who sell their products alongside farmers and other food producers directly to consumers. These retailers often offer unique, handcrafted items that reflect the local culture and heritage, such as clothing, jewelry, home décor, and other specialty products. By participating in farmers' markets, these local retailers can establish a direct connection with their customers, build relationships within the community, and contribute to the local economy (Lyson et al., 1995). Characteristics of local retailers include personalized customer service and the availability of specialized products tailored to community needs (Pandey et al., 2015; Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Local retailers provide vital economic and social support within their communities and can help in area revitalization efforts (Wilson & Hodges, 2022).

Several studies have examined the factors influencing local retailer loyalty and the impact of these factors on consumer decision making. Studies by Noble et al. (2006) and Khare (2012) reveal differences in shopping motives and local merchant loyalty based on age, gender, and decision-making styles. In the study by Wilson and Hodges (2022), consumers were motivated to purchase from local businesses in support of downtown revitalization efforts. The experiences of both shoppers and local retailers play a crucial role in understanding the significance of shopping local, where they are motivated by a desire to support their community and engage in civic

participation (Wilson & Hodges, 2022). Further, a study by Zebal and Jackson (2019) examined cues influencing consumer attitudes towards local retail apparel brands within emerging markets, highlighting the importance of product authenticity and consumer cosmopolitanism in influencing consumer preferences. Moreover, it has been found that the social actions and institutional factors undertaken by retailers to attract local shoppers substantially influence the shopping behaviors of rural consumers, thereby providing invaluable insights for rural development (Kim & Stoel, 2010). Additionally, Pandey et al.'s (2015) exploration of antecedents to local store loyalty in India found that cultural values and product pricing are drivers of local store loyalty. Factors like social capital also influence local retail store patronage, emphasizing the significance of community attachment and reciprocity in shaping consumer behaviors (Qiu et al., 2023).

Several studies highlight the limitations of the literature examining local retailers, such as the exclusion of certain demographic factors, limited geographical representation, and the need for more comprehensive models to understand local retailer loyalty and sustainable practices (Khare, 2012; Kim & Stoel, 2010; Noble et al., 2006). Furthermore, the review of literature indicates that not many studies have examined the impact of consumer values of community engagement, need for uniqueness, and consumer awareness of the environmental and social impact of apparel and textile production on consumer perceptions and their intentions to patronize local retailers. Despite these limitations, extant studies collectively emphasize the important role of local retailers within their communities, by offering personalized services, actively engaging with their communities, and catering to community needs (Noble et al., 2006; Wilson, 2018; Zebal & Jackson, 2019).

The interconnectedness between community engagement and consumer behavior has implications for fostering stronger community ties, which are reflected in the overarching goals of Fibershed, as it seeks to create resilient, community-based supply chains. To further explicate the importance of the local retailer in sustainable apparel consumption, the next section focuses on retailers' commitment to sustainability. Specifically, literature that examines the initiatives undertaken by local retailers to embed sustainability into their operations and the impact of these initiatives on consumers is discussed.

Commitment to Sustainability

As discussed earlier in this chapter, *sustainable retailing* refers to the process of accounting for social and environmental impacts at every stage of the retailing process, from the procurement of raw materials to the usage and disposal of products, as well as the health and safety of employees and the general public (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021). The concept includes retailing practices that are geared towards responsible operations that seek to minimize environmental degradation (Yang et al. 2017). This dedication can be seen in retailers' adoption of responsible policies, transparent practices, and performance measurements emphasizing the significance of sustainability within their operations (Jones et al., 2005; Mauri et al., 2022). By selling sustainable products, managing supply chains sustainably, and developing initiatives in line with sustainability principles, retailers can actively showcase their commitment (Youn et al., 2017).

Sánchez-González et al. (2020) investigated the influence of consumers' ethical behaviors on retailers' commitment to sustainability development and found that their influence resulted in retailers' engaging in responsible procurement, product reuse, recycling, and transparent communication of sustainability initiatives to consumers. Subsequently, these

retailers benefitted from increased store equity, loyalty, and word-of-mouth recommendations (Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Setting performance benchmarks, including key sustainability indicators, allows retailers to gauge and improve their environmental impact while enhancing brand reputation, customer loyalty, and appealing to environmentally conscious consumers (Jones et al., 2005; Mauri et al., 2022; Youn et al., 2017). For example, Youn et al. (2017) developed a framework to assess retailer sustainability based on sustainability assessment frameworks, such as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index, the GRI G4 Guidelines, the Tesco KIP, and the Walmart Supplier Sustainability Assessment. These frameworks set targets and evaluate performance related to dimensions like energy, climate, material efficiency, responsible procurement, community and human rights, labor standards, and other such indicators. Ghiselli (2022), in a study on the role of retailers in the distribution process, highlighted the potential actions that retailers can take to minimize negative social and environmental impacts through sustainable procurement practices, creation of sustainable private label brands, and adoption of sustainable supply chain strategies. This dedication not only minimizes negative social and environmental impacts but also fosters positive consumer perceptions, loyalty, and brand equity (Ghiselli, 2022; Lehner, 2015; Sánchez-González et al., 2020).

Retailers can benefit significantly from their commitment to sustainability through various comprehensive advantages. From facilitating responsible production and consumption practices, to aiding in reduced negative social and environmental impacts through actions such as minimizing use of disposable plastic products, more careful selection and monitoring of suppliers, and eliminating the use of virgin raw materials (Ghiselli, 2022), such actions create a positive impact on consumers' loyalty behaviors (Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Notably, a commitment to sustainability can elevate brand reputation, attract environmentally conscious

consumers and investors, and even lead to profits, thereby strengthening market positioning and competitiveness (Jones et al., 2005; Lehner, 2015; Youn et al., 2017). Ultimately, such initiatives not only align with sustainability principles, but can also yield profits and provide a competitive edge within the retail sector (Lehner, 2015).

Consumer attitudes toward sustainable consumption are reshaping retailer strategies, in that more and more consumers are urging retailers to offer more sustainable products and to engage in more responsible practices (Mauri et al., 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). This transformation emphasizes the evolving importance of consumer perceptions in the retail sector, highlighting consumers' willingness to engage with and support retailers that are committed to sustainability practices. This is evidenced in a study by Kozar and Connell (2013), who found that when consumers were more knowledgeable about the environmental and social impact of the apparel and textile industry, they were more likely to engage in sustainable consumption behaviors like seeking sustainability information about the company before making purchasing decisions or boycotting products they deem unsustainable. As consumers increasingly value sustainability, they demonstrate a willingness to pay premium prices for sustainable products and prefer to patronize retailers aligned with their sustainability values (Kim et al., 2015). This shift underscores the relevance of consumer perceptions, compelling retailers to align their strategies with sustainable practices to satisfy consumer demands and remain competitive.

In the context of this dissertation, the focus is on including localized and sustainable retail practices within the Fibershed S2S Framework. The literature on the consumer-driven shift discussed in this section highlights the need for retailers to integrate sustainable practices to not only meet market expectations, but also contribute to the broader goals of sustainability. The

next section examines the literature on authenticity relative to retailers and what it means for sustainable production and consumption.

Authenticity

In the current retail landscape, the rapid pace of production of fast fashion often means sacrificing garment quality in favor of expediency and promoting cost efficiency in favor of environmental sustainability and ethical labor practices (Jung, 2014). As a counter to this prevailing trend, emerging consumer preferences underscore the significance of unique offerings, local business support, and product authenticity (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022). Authenticity in this context is defined by retailers' emphasis on such factors as heritage, originality, and social commitment, often as a way to uniquely position them against the competition (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Handler, 1986).

According to Handler (1986), authenticity is a cultural construct in contemporary Western society, characterized as the pursuit of “unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched, and traditional experiences” (p. 2). Per Bruhn et al. (2012), authenticity is displayed through stability or continuity over time, the fulfillment of promises, creativity, innovation, reliability, and a natural and genuine character. As posited by Beverland (2005), authenticity may stem from the intrinsic qualities of an object, its connection to an historical era, organizational structure, or nature, and may also be attributed to it by marketers and consumers. Furthermore, the qualities may be genuine, or they may be engineered to portray authenticity (Beverland, 2005). According to Ram et al. (2016), authenticity can refer to qualities like genuineness, reliability, and originality, as distinct from imitations or reproductions.

Prior studies highlight factors such as traditions, commitment to quality, nostalgia, legitimacy, and origin (Beverland, 2005; Bruhn et al., 2012, Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022) that

signify sincerity, craftsmanship and connections to heritage, and contribute to consumers' perceptions of authenticity in retail products and experiences. Beverland (2005), in a study on luxury wines, positioned authenticity as characterized by the creation of sincere narratives, open sharing of handcrafting methods, and ties to the local area. Similarly, in a study on the retailing of Scottish goods, Chhabra (2005) framed authenticity as representing heritage, tradition, and originality, which are instrumental in building customer trust and achieving differentiation from competitors. Authenticity was found to be supply-driven, with producers seeking verifications from trade fairs, historians, and ancestral heritage to authenticate their products (Chhabra, 2005).

Bruhn et al. (2012) developed a scale for measuring consumers' perceptions of brand authenticity that includes four dimensions: continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness, providing a robust framework for evaluating different brands and their levels of authenticity. Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2022), in their study on consumer attitudes towards online shopping in traditional retailers, found that authenticity influenced consumer perceptions of traditional retailers with regards to store quality and image, positively affecting customer loyalty and their inclination towards engaging in online shopping with these retailers.

Furthermore, when investigating the slow-fashion movement to determine consumer orientation towards slow fashion, Jung (2014) found that consumers that value artisan-made clothing and traditional techniques tend to trust authentic retailers, as these retailers offer unique narratives and help them to stand out in the market. In particular, studies have found that perceived authenticity associated with sustainability and ethical claims influences consumer trust and loyalty towards retailers, in that they believe that the retailer fits with their pursuit of genuine and traditional experiences (Handler, 1986; Kennedy et al., 2016).

This emphasis on authenticity empowers retailers to establish genuine connections with consumers and compete effectively with larger corporations by resonating more deeply with those consumers seeking authentic experiences in an increasingly commodified retail environment (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Jung, 2014). These authentic approaches in retail not only foster credibility but engender consumer loyalty by carving out a distinctive identity within a highly competitive market landscape, and thereby influence consumer behavior in positive ways (Bruhn et al., 2012).

Retailers that prioritize authenticity establish trust and nurture positive consumer perceptions, fostering long-term relationships with their customer base (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022). Ultimately, the strategic adoption of authentic principles within retail operations can serve as a powerful competitive advantage, attracting consumers seeking trustworthiness, unique narratives, and genuine experiences in their consumption choices, thereby reinforcing the ties between authenticity and sustainability in retailing. Although several studies emphasize the importance of authenticity in influencing consumer perceptions, few have examined it within the context of sustainable retailing, which is a gap that is addressed by this dissertation.

Rooted in local communities, Fibershed fosters a close-knit relationship between producers and consumers, emphasizing regional sourcing and manufacturing. This localized approach not only fosters community engagement, but also supports sustainability by encouraging climate beneficial and regenerative agricultural practices. Moreover, Fibershed characterizes authenticity by prioritizing genuine, transparent practices, valuing traditional craftsmanship, and honoring unique garment production. With these qualities, Fibershed is ideally suited to support local retailers that are committed to community engagement, sustainability, and authenticity, fostering a conscientious and interconnected approach to apparel

production, distribution, and consumption. By harmonizing economic, environmental, and social goals, sustainable retailing acknowledges the influential role of the consumer in shaping sustainable retail practices. By incorporating sustainable retailers into the S2S Framework, Fibershed can enhance its sustainability initiatives. As retailers have direct interaction with consumers, they can influence consumer behavior in terms of sustainable apparel consumption, which is the focus of the next section.

Sustainable Apparel Consumption

As discussed previously, the fast fashion industry is a major polluter and contributor to social inequities due to widespread unethical manufacturing practices (Niinimäki et al., 2020). However, consumers, alongside manufacturers, share responsibility for the negative environmental and social impacts caused by fast fashion trends, clothing disposal habits, and the resulting throwaway culture (Hassan et al., 2022; Kozłowski et al., 2018). At the same time, such extremes have prompted an increased consumer awareness of and call for sustainable fashion consumption practices (Fletcher, 2018). Yet, Lundblad and Davies (2016) argue that there is still no single standard definition of the concept of sustainable fashion. Various terms like *ethical fashion*, *green fashion*, and *eco-fashion* have been used interchangeably to describe sustainable fashion (Lundblad & Davies, 2016), including “clothes that are created and consumed in a way that can be, quite literally, sustained, while protecting both the environment and those producing garments” (Chan, 2021, para. 2).

Regardless of the terms being used, there is a general consensus among researchers that sustainable fashion consumption refers to the practice of consuming fashion products in a way that supports the ability of current and future generations to meet their needs without causing irreversible damage to the environment or loss of function of natural systems. Sustainable

fashion consumption involves considering the environmental, social, and ethical impacts of fashion consumption throughout the entire lifecycle of a garment, from production to disposal (Chan, 2021; Chan & Wong, 2012; Hassan et al., 2022; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Niinimäki et al., 2020; Sivapalan et al., 2021).

Because there are several aspects of the apparel consumption cycle, including purchase, use, care, reuse, and disposal, there are many ways a consumer can engage in sustainable consumption (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). For example, during the initial phase of consumption, individuals have the option to buy eco-friendly clothing or clothing made from organic cotton that is sourced ethically (Gam, 2011; Goworek, 2011), as well as to purchase second-hand clothing or to rent clothing (Chan 2021; Iran & Schrader, 2017; Lundblad & Davies, 2016). In the subsequent stage of utilization, maintenance, and wardrobe preservation, individuals have the potential to extend the lifespan of a garment (Kozłowski et al., 2018) by altering their laundering techniques (Niinimäki, 2017) or engaging in repairs (Chan 2021; Harris et al., 2016). Lastly, during the final stage of disposal, individuals may choose to repurpose their clothing (Niinimäki, 2017), donate their used items to a charitable organization (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009), or sell them to a secondhand store (Niinimäki, 2017). Other acts of sustainable consumption practices include lifestyle habits like using energy efficient products, composting household waste, conserving water or energy, changing modes of transportation to more sustainable alternatives, reducing material consumption, and following voluntary simplicity lifestyles (Jackson, 2005)

There is extensive research on sustainable fashion consumption, particularly focusing on the different dimensions of consumers' values, motivations, and purchase behaviors. Studies highlight factors influencing purchase behaviors (Gam, 2011; Kautish & Khare, 2022), industry

trends and determinants of environmentally friendly apparel purchase intentions (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Goworek, 2011), as well as personal norms and environmental concern relative to disposal patterns (Hassan et al., 2022; Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Furthermore, studies by Chan and Wong (2012), Sánchez-González et al. (2020), and Shen et al. (2012) shed light on attributes influencing sustainable consumption, store-related factors impacting consumer decisions, and the willingness to pay a premium for ethical fashion. The interplay between personal values, consumption behaviors, and purchasing criteria illuminates the complex relationship between consumer values and sustainable apparel choices (Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Sivapalan et al., 2021).

As Henninger et al. (2016) state, “sustainable fashion can be interpreted from various different realities and incorporate several aspects. Data indicate that there is no one way of defining what sustainable fashion entails” (p. 17). As underscored by Andrei et al. (2017), extant literature highlights the significance of consumers’ personal values as important predictors of responsible consumption. Yet, there is a lack of relevant studies on how consumers’ values like community attachment and need for uniqueness, or their awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production influence their perceptions of local retailers. Community attachment drives consumers to support local businesses and seek out products that contribute to their community's well-being, including locally-sourced, sustainable apparel. This preference reflects a desire to support local economies and reduce environmental impact. Similarly, the need for uniqueness compels consumers to gravitate towards locally crafted and artisanal garments, aligning with their individuality and rejecting mass-produced fashion. By acknowledging these values, local retailers can create a sense of exclusivity and personal connection by adapting their product assortments to these consumer preferences. Additionally,

heightened consumer awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production underscores the importance of sustainability and ethical practices. Transparent communication of these values by local retailers offering Fibershed affiliated products can foster trust and credibility among environmentally and socially conscious consumers who prioritize their community and individuality, thereby influencing their purchasing decisions.

In the exploration of consumer behavior within sustainable apparel and local retail, the crucial role of values and awareness becomes evident, influencing perceptions and preferences. Key factors such as consumers' community attachment and need for uniqueness, as well as their awareness of environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production can drive choices, underscoring the importance of understanding the underlying factors. By delving into these motivations, valuable insights into consumer decision-making processes emerge, making way for a deeper examination of consumer values and awareness, and their implications for sustainable apparel consumption. The section that follows discusses the literature on the two broad concepts of consumer values and sustainability awareness and elaborates on the related constructs.

Consumer Values

Values are intrinsic, enduring beliefs that form the core of an individual's ethical and moral framework, significantly impacting their behavior and decision-making across various aspects of life (Kahle, 1983; Schwartz, 1992). These values, often developed early in life, serve as guiding principles and influence how individuals perceive, interact, and make choices within their environments (Batra et al., 2001; Peterson et al., 2021). Schwartz (1994) stated that a value is defined as “a desirable transsituational goal varying in importance, which serves as a guiding principle in the life of a person or other social entity” (p. 21). Rooted in cultural and social

contexts, consumer values encompass a spectrum ranging from altruistic values, which emphasize the well-being of others and the environment, to egoistic values, which prioritize self-interest and personal gains (Schwartz, 1994). Additionally, biospheric values reflect concerns for ecological well-being and sustainability, shaping individuals' ethical considerations and attitudes toward environmentally responsible actions (Sivalpalan et al., 2021). These diverse consumer values collectively underpin the complex motivations driving consumer behaviors, especially with regards to sustainable apparel, where ethical considerations and environmental consciousness play important roles.

Within the context of sustainable apparel consumption, values exert a profound influence on consumer behavior. Consumers exhibit varying motivations and priorities when it comes to apparel, encompassing desires for self-expression, aesthetic contentment, and conformity to societal norms (Kim & Damhorst, 1998), as well as ethical responsibilities (Manchiraju & Sadachar, 2014; Peterson et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2006), and the desire to evade feelings of buyer's remorse (Ha-Brookshire & Hodges, 2009). The quest for self-expression through apparel choices often drives individuals to seek unique and distinctive items that resonate with their personal identity and values, thereby emphasizing the importance of uniqueness in consumption decisions (Lang & Armstrong, 2018). At the same time, consumers that value ethical responsibility seek to support ethical and sustainable practices in apparel by choosing environmentally friendly products or supporting small retailers, in order to align their consumption behaviors with their values (Shaw et al., 2006; Stone, 1954). Finally, consumers often view locally-owned businesses as an integral part of the community (Wilson & Hodges, 2022), exhibit sympathy and moral obligation toward these businesses, and a willingness to support them, at times even at the expense of higher prices or limited product assortments

(Stone, 1954). Following the exploration of the role of consumer values in shaping sustainable apparel consumption, the next section focuses on the concepts of community attachment and need for uniqueness. These aspects are aimed at understanding consumers' preferences, perceptions, and decision-making related to sustainable apparel and specifically within local retail environments.

Community Attachment

According to Landry et al. (2005), a community can be defined as a group of individuals whose relationships are interlinked with each other based on shared interests and patterns of behavior that are recognizable within a common locality. Community attachment represents the emotional connection individuals have with their community and has been found to influence retail choices and other kinds of consumer behaviors. The concept encapsulates an array of emotions like loyalty, identification, and a sense of belonging within a community, exerting significant influence on members' behaviors and decision-making processes related to consumption (Miller, 2001).

As a multidimensional construct, community attachment is strengthened by social bonds, associations, and friendships (Miller, 2001), amity and sentiment (Stinner et al., 1990), and a sense of belonging within a community (Handelman & Bello, 2004; Nasr et al., 2022). Community attachment not only affects consumer choices, but also shapes spending patterns (Cowell, 1994), local shopping tendencies (Wilson & Hodges, 2022), and the level of reciprocity (Qiu et al., 2023) within a community. According to Skippari et al. (2016), factors such as person-environment fit and congruence between personal values and community norms further shape this attachment, influencing local patronage and reinforcing a sense of belonging within

communities. Moreover, factors such as duration of residence (Goudy, 1982), age (Stinner et al., 1990), and local social ties (Miller & Besser, 2000) also influence community attachment.

In Miller's (2001) study on in-shopping behavior in rural communities, higher levels of community attachment were associated with increased levels of reciprocity, indicating an expectation of mutual exchange and cooperation within the community, influencing consumers' inclination towards shopping for apparel and home furnishings from local retailers. Skippari et al. (2017) examined the drivers of local grocery retail patronage and found that consumers' values of local community attachment, their perception of local retail stores as a place for social interaction, and the vitality of retailers' services influenced consumer satisfaction and their patronage of local retailers. Wilson and Hodges (2022), in their study related to downtown revitalization and shopping local, found that individuals engaged in local shopping demonstrate a strong sense of community care, civic engagement, and belief in the positive impact of supporting local businesses.

As evident from the above literature, consumers' community attachment serves as an important factor for understanding their emotional ties and loyalty to local communities, shaping their preferences for local retailers and more sustainable apparel consumption behaviors. This attachment underscores the importance of localized connections and community-centric values, which resonate with the principles of Fibershed. Although prior studies have examined the impact of community attachment on patronage of local retailers, a gap exists in the literature regarding the specific influence of community attachment on consumer perceptions of local retailers' sustainability and authenticity, and, as examined in this dissertation, consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Fibershed's emphasis on sustainability, localized connections, and community-centric values align closely with

consumers' attachment to their communities and can foster stronger bonds between consumers and local retailers.

The examination of community attachment explains the strong emotional ties consumers can develop with their local communities and the subsequent impact of these ties on their shopping behaviors. This emotional connection extends to the domain of sustainable apparel consumption, where consumers aim to harmonize their purchasing decisions with their values. Likewise, consumers that strongly value need for uniqueness are compelled by a desire to articulate their individuality and distinctiveness through their consumption choices (Lang & Armstrong, 2018). Examining the values of community attachment alongside need for uniqueness can shed light on the different factors that underlie consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Need for Uniqueness

Need for uniqueness is a psychological construct influencing perceptions and actions across various domains (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Snyder, 1992). Need for uniqueness encompasses dimensions such as nonconformity, distinctiveness, and self-expression, compelling individuals to pursue experiences and possessions that set them apart (Halepete et al., 2009; Tian et al., 2001). Individuals driven by this need seek experiences and possessions that set them apart, while often promoting socially responsible consumption practices at the same time (Andrei et al., 2017). For example, consumers might exhibit their need for uniqueness by promoting themselves as ethical consumers who prioritize ethical and responsible choices in their purchasing behavior by supporting small businesses, by not purchasing from companies that behave irresponsibly, by purchasing products that are related to sustainable causes, and by reducing overall consumption out of the desire to protect the environment (Andrei et al., 2017).

Culture, personality, and societal factors have been found to significantly shape consumers' need for uniqueness. For example, individualistic cultures nurture a stronger desire for distinctiveness (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Consumers' intrinsic values like self-expression motivate uniqueness through personal choices, while extrinsic values seek validation via possessions (Lang & Armstrong, 2018). Gender roles and societal expectations have also been found to shape the extent to which consumers are motivated through uniqueness (Seo & Lang, 2019; Tian et al., 2001). Likewise, childhood experiences with fostering creativity are thought to determine the extent to which a consumer values uniqueness (Zhang et al., 2023), driving preferences in apparel and lifestyle choices. For instance, those who value uniqueness often seek rare products that evoke impressions of scarcity, satisfying their need for distinction (Seo & Lang, 2019, Wu et al., 2012).

Prior research on uniqueness is diverse. Lang and Armstrong (2018) link uniqueness with collaborative consumption, while Tian et al. (2001) explore the trait antecedents of counterconformity, wherein individuals pursue differentiation from others through purchase, use, and disposal of consumer goods. Zebal and Jackson (2019) identified cues such as product authenticity, consumer cosmopolitanism, and consumer ethnocentrism influencing local retail apparel brand purchases. Researchers have examined the need for uniqueness relative to clothing swap events (Matthews & Hodges, 2015), consumer loyalty to small businesses (Andrei et al., 2017), psychological antecedents of fair-trade purchasing (Halepete et al., 2009), impact of product knowledge and clothing involvement on luxury item purchases (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2016), and effects of gender and attitudes toward personalized apparel (Seo & Lang, 2019).

Extant research has found that the pursuit of individual distinctiveness can pose sustainability challenges, especially by fostering unsustainable consumption (Bhaduri &

Stanforth, 2016; Lang & Armstrong, 2018). For example, overemphasis on luxury goods often disregards environmental impact (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2016), hindering collective sustainability action (Snyder, 1992). The resource-intensive nature of uniqueness might challenge scalable sustainable solutions (Halepete et al., 2009). Fashion trends driven by need for uniqueness may lead to overconsumption and to ignoring environmental and social consequences (Tian et al., 2001). Notably, Cheema and Kaikati (2010) found that, contrary to the typical pattern of consumer satisfaction and word-of-mouth recommendations, individuals who highly value uniqueness are less inclined to publicly recommend products they own, thereby hindering the adoption of sustainable products.

At the same time, several studies highlight the connection between need for uniqueness and sustainable practices, such as support for local retailers and artisans, and the need to stand out by being seen as supporting sustainable products. For example, according to Zebal and Jackson (2019), consumers that value uniqueness prefer local retail apparel brands for unique designs. Noble et al. (2006) found that the need for uniqueness correlates with loyalty to local merchants, particularly among females valuing personalized shopping experiences. Customers that highly value uniqueness pay more for luxury items associated with artisanal brands due to their unique heritage (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2016). Collectively, these studies underscore how local retailers can appeal to consumers' desires for individuality by offering distinct products, personalized experiences, and a sense of community connection, suggesting the importance of implementing business strategies that attract and retain those consumers that value uniqueness. However, a gap exists in the literature regarding the specific influence of need for uniqueness on consumer perceptions of local retailers' that offer locally produced sustainable apparel, such as products produced by Fibershed.

Consumers who value uniqueness may have increased interest in Fibershed - a concept that is focused on fostering regionally-based systems that prioritize ethical sourcing, reducing environmental impact, and supporting local economies. Individuals with a high need for uniqueness often seek personalized, distinctive products, which is a trait that aligns with the philosophy of Fibershed. Through locally-produced fibers, textiles, and garments, consumers have the opportunity to access unique, artisanal products that reflect the distinct characteristics of the region. This connection allows consumers to fulfill their need for uniqueness through the support of sustainable, locally-sourced garments from local retailers, while contributing to the preservation of traditional crafts and promoting environmental stewardship within the apparel and textile industry.

As discussed in this section, while the need for uniqueness motivates individualistic preferences and behaviors, it also intersects with sustainability considerations. Consumers increasingly seek products that not only reflect their distinctiveness, but also align with their values of ethical consumption and responsible stewardship of resources, which highlights the interconnectedness between consumers' desires for uniqueness and their growing consciousness of the environmental and social implications of their purchasing decisions, which is the focus of the next section.

Consumer Awareness of Sustainability

Sustainability includes a focus on both environmental preservation and social well-being. Scholars have defined environmental sustainability as the responsible preservation and respect for all life within an ecosystem, urging individual actions like waste minimization and the adoption of circular economy models (Ali, 2021; Kautish & Khare, 2022; Sobuj et al., 2021). In contrast, social sustainability revolves around maintaining social well-being, justice, inclusivity,

and equity, while promoting social cohesion and community engagement (Ali, 2021; Catlin et al., 2017; Shen et al., 2012). Studies reveal that challenges persist in terms of bridging the gap between consumers' awareness of sustainability and their actual behavior. Limited knowledge of sustainability issues among consumers has led to discrepancies between intentions and actions (Connell & Kozar, 2014; Kim & Damhorst, 1998). Furthermore, the dissemination of information about sustainability faces hurdles, such as lack of readily available information or engaging content, and uncertainties regarding source reliability, all of which hinders informed decision-making by consumers (Muthu, 2017). Increased awareness can prompt consumers to seek out sustainable alternatives and support initiatives like Fibershed that prioritize sustainable practices and environmental and social responsibility. The next section delves deeper into the specific environmental and social impacts associated with apparel and textile production, explicating the importance of consumer awareness in driving sustainable practices within the industry.

Environmental Impact

The apparel industry's entire lifecycle, from production to consumption and disposal bears significant responsibility for most of the environmental degradation that is caused by industrial activity today (Niinimäki, 2017), which has spurred a growing awareness and demand for environmentally sustainable fashion (Sivapalan et al., 2021). Consumer awareness of the environmental impact of apparel and textile production is a critical aspect of sustainable fashion consumption. As with the definition of sustainable fashion discussed earlier (Acuti et al., 2020), people intuitively know what environmental awareness is, but there is no clear definition or accepted terminology of the concept of environmental awareness (Ham et al., 2016). Because of this, different terms like *environmental awareness*, *environmental consciousness*, and

environmental concern are often used to convey the same meaning (Ham et al., 2016).

According to Ham et al. (2016), environmental awareness can be broadly defined as an individual's inclination to react to environmental issues based on their values, beliefs, societal norms, and understanding of the consequences of human behavior on the environment (p. 160).

One of the primary drivers of consumer awareness of environmental impact in apparel and textile production is the growing body of research highlighting the industry's detrimental effects on the environment. Studies have documented environmental issues related to extensive water and energy consumption, chemical pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions associated with garment manufacturing processes (Fletcher, 2008; Lang & Armstrong, 2016; Niinimäki, 2017). Consumer awareness of environmental impact also stems from efforts by environmental organizations, advocacy groups, and ethical fashion movements to raise awareness about the social and environmental injustices prevalent in the fashion industry (Fibershed, n.d.). This information has led to increased public awareness of the environmental consequences of fast fashion and mass production, prompting consumers to seek out more sustainable alternatives.

Environmental awareness among consumers has been found to be influenced by several factors, including personal values, consumption values, environmental attitudes, situational influences, and product characteristics (Santos-Corrada et al., 2024; Sivapalan et al., 2021). Furthermore, social factors such as knowledge, pro-environmental attitudes, and community social capital contribute significantly to environmental awareness (Castaneda et al., 2015). Elements like environmental consciousness, interest, knowledge, ease of purchase, branding, and eco-label credibility augment an individual's environmental awareness (Ali, 2021; Kim & Lee, 2023). Understanding the influence of personal values, consumption values, environmental attitudes, and situational influences on environmental awareness allows for a detailed

examination of consumer motivations and preferences that influence sustainable apparel consumption behaviors. For instance, Kautish and Khare (2022) examined the impact of cosmopolitanism, global social identity, and green peer influence on individual's awareness and understanding of sustainable apparel and found that online communities could play an important role in consumers' awareness and perceptions of sustainable apparel and fashion consumption.

Awareness of environmental sustainability is manifested in various consumer behaviors and attitudes like intentions to purchase sustainable products (Chang & Watchravesringkan, 2018) and willingness to pay more for sustainable apparel (Cowan & Kinley, 2014). Sivapalan et al. (2021) noted that heightened awareness is related to loyalty intentions, purchasing behavior, and product satisfaction among consumers. Consumers' awareness of environmental impact has significant implications for their perceptions of local retailers' sustainability efforts. For example, research suggests that consumers perceive local retailers as more sustainable and environmentally responsible compared to large multinational corporations (Boyd et al., 2017). This perception is often based on the assumption that local retailers have closer ties to their communities, source materials locally, and prioritize environmental stewardship (Curtis, 2003).

As evidenced by the literature, environmental awareness of apparel and textile production shapes consumers' attitudes towards sustainability, influencing their preferences for retailers who prioritize environmental stewardship. Fibershed emphasizes local sourcing, community engagement, and environmental stewardship in the production of textiles and apparel, aligning closely with consumers' growing awareness and concerns about sustainability. By examining the relationship between consumers' environmental awareness and their perceptions of local retailers' sustainability, this dissertation explores the role of consumers' environmental awareness relative to Fibershed. As discussed in the next section, literature that examines

consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production extends considerations beyond environmental factors.

Social Impact

According to Das (2023), the influence of the apparel industry extends beyond aesthetics, playing a significant role in shaping individual identities and societal norms. However, the industry's practices in terms of production, distribution, and consumption have raised critical concerns regarding working conditions and labor rights (Niinimäki, 2017). Despite monitoring methods like codes of conduct and factory inspections, retailers struggle to ensure fair wages, prevent child labor, and maintain minimum labor standards within their global supply chains (Pal, 2014), calling for increased action towards social responsibility by consumers, governments, and society at large (Murphy et al., 2013).

Social responsibility in the apparel industry, per Dickson et al. (2009), includes social concerns to be addressed, with key issues being “forced labor, low wages, excessive hours of work, discrimination, health and safety hazards, psychological and physical abuse, lack of awareness of workers’ rights, and lack of worker representation for negotiations with management” (p. 6). Awareness encompasses the knowledge or perception of a situation or fact that is instrumental in influencing sustainable consumption practices, which, in turn, impacts consumer attitudes and behavior toward sustainability (Santos-Corrada et al., 2024). Ethical awareness refers to consumer awareness of the ethical impacts of production (Santos-Corrada et al., 2024). Similar to the terminology related to environmental awareness, very often the terms *ethical*, *green*, and *social* are used interchangeably to mean the same thing.

Several studies have examined consumer awareness of the social impact of apparel and textile production relative to consumer attitudes and behavior. Similar studies by Dickson (1999)

and Kozar and Connell (2013), conducted ten years apart and measuring the same variables found increased awareness among consumers on issues like labor exploitation, sweatshops, ethical behaviors related to firms, and issues related to apparel and textile production. With regards to consumer attitudes and intention to purchase, Kim and Damhorst (1998) found that consumer values and awareness were significant predictors of attitude and intention to engage in socially responsible behaviors. Similarly, Santos-Corrada et al. (2024), in the context of circular economic models, investigated the impact of environmental, ethical, and brand awareness on consumers' attitudes and ethical purchase intentions, and found that consumers who have higher awareness and positive attitudes towards sustainability are more likely to purchase sustainable products. Kozar and Connell (2013) found that awareness and attitudes were strong indicators of apparel purchasing behaviors, with individuals who have higher awareness of the social impact of production more likely to engage in socially responsible behavior.

However, a few studies have found a disconnect between consumer awareness of the social impact of apparel and textile production and their intention to engage in socially responsible behavior (Dickson, 1999; Diddi & Niehm, 2016). This disconnect may be attributed to consumer skepticism related to greenwashing (Muthu, 2017), consumer unwillingness to sacrifice style or pay higher prices for socially responsible products, or consumers placing more importance on other product attributes like price and quality (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). It could also be attributed to consumers' uncertainty when their beliefs lack actual industry knowledge or as a form of nationalism where they prioritize concern for their own country's residents over disadvantaged foreign workers (Dickson, 1999).

As consumers increasingly become aware of the detrimental consequences of globalized apparel supply chains for workers and society, Fibershed emerges as an ideal form of localized

sustainability that addresses the social impact of production by promoting fair labor practices, community engagement, and the preservation of traditional crafts. This localized approach not only mitigates environmental harm but also fosters a deeper sense of social responsibility and community attachment, mirroring the evolving consumer sentiments toward responsible apparel and textile production and consumption. Ultimately, understanding consumer awareness of the social impact of apparel and textile production helps in assessing their perceptions of local retailers' sustainable practices.

Awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production plays an important role in shaping consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Understanding both environmental and social dimensions is essential for retailers to develop effective strategies that resonate with consumers and drive meaningful change. Consumer awareness of the negative implications of apparel production for environmental and social sustainability exerts influence on retailers' practices through demand. This demand, in turn, motivates retailers to encourage producers within the manufacturing supply chain to behave ethically, ultimately fostering socially responsible apparel and textile production and distribution (Muthu, 2017). The rise of ethical and socially responsible consumerism has prompted companies to respond by introducing more 'ethical products,' and reflect a heightened social and environmental consciousness through their product offerings (Mostaghel & Chirumalla, 2021). Ethically aware consumers who recognize the impact of unsustainable practices use moral values to guide purchasing decisions, reflecting conscientious choices based on personal beliefs. These choices reflect consumers' considerations for environmental and human welfare, fair trade, and ethical products in retail, addressing specific ethical, social, or environmental concerns (Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Fibershed, through its commitment to environmentally and socially responsible practices, and its

goal to foster consumer awareness through education and transparent communication, can empower consumers to make informed choices that align with their values and contribute to positive social and environmental outcomes.

Sustainability and Fibershed

Consumer awareness of sustainability issues, coupled with their community-oriented values and desire for uniqueness, plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers. As consumers grow more aware of the environmental and social implications of their purchases, along with their loyalty to retailers who share their values of community attachment and need for uniqueness, they actively seek out establishments that not only align with their values but also demonstrate a strong commitment to sustainability. Per the literature, more often than not, such establishments are local retailers rather than global corporate retailers or national chains (Kim & Stoel, 2010).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, consumers' values of attachment towards their community (Miller, 2001; Wilson & Hodges, 2022) and their need for uniqueness (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Tian et al., 2001), as well as their awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production influence their behaviors towards local retailers (Mauri et al., 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Qiu et al. (2023), in their investigation of the influence of social capital on local retail store patronage in an urban setting found that consumers' values of community attachment have a positive influence on store patronage measured by frequency of visiting the store. Noble et al. (2006), in their study exploring the impact of consumer motivations and gender on local merchant loyalty, found that individuals seeking uniqueness tend to patronize local retail stores because these retailers have customized product assortments that are different. Shen et al. (2012), in their study examining the impact of

consumer awareness of social and environmental impacts of apparel and textile production on their support of sustainable retailers, found a positive relationship between consumer support for sustainable business and their willingness to pay a premium for sustainable offerings. The extent to which this idea may be extended to retailers offering Fibershed affiliated products is the focus of this dissertation.

Fibershed promotes the idea of sourcing materials and products locally, thereby reducing the environmental impact of apparel and textile production and supporting local artisans and producers. Fibershed endeavors to bolster regional communities by offering consumers authentic, artisanal apparel that celebrates local craftsmanship and supports artisans within their communities. Although there are a number of studies that investigate the impact of consumers' values and awareness of sustainability on their intentions to patronize retailers, there are no studies that investigate these concepts relative to local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. This study therefore fills a gap in existing research by examining the influence of consumers' values, such as community attachment and need for uniqueness, alongside their awareness of the negative environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production, on their perceptions of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, thereby setting the stage for investigating the role of the retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework.

Indeed, consumers play a crucial role in the adoption and implementation of sustainability practices through their attitudes and behaviors. The growing emphasis on sustainable apparel consumption reflects the recognition of the complex factors shaping behavior, combined with the values inherent in lifestyle choices (Hargreaves, 2011). As a result, diverse theoretical frameworks have been used to study sustainability and consumer behavior. As Jackson (2005) states:

Some models of consumer behaviour focus on internal antecedents of behaviour such as values, attitudes and intentions. Others focus more on external factors like incentives, norms and institutional constraints. Some models are good at describing internal (cognitive) aspects of individual decisions but fail to reflect the importance of contextual or situational variables and vice versa (p. x).

Consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products can be framed as a social practice, wherein behavior is not merely a set of individual actions focused on individual behaviors, but are actions embedded within broader social contexts and routines. By supporting local retailers and choosing Fibershed-affiliated products, consumers engage in a collective practice that promotes sustainability, community resilience, and ethical consumption within their social environment. Thus, a theoretical framework that takes contextual factors into account is necessary to achieve the purpose and objectives of this dissertation.

Social Practice Theory

Several theories, frameworks, and models have been developed to examine individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and values as predictors of behavior. Many of these frameworks assume that behavioral outcomes are the result of a linear and rational process and are appropriate to both understand and influence behavior change (Jackson, 2005). For example, behavioral economics, extending psychological research, offers explanation for behaviors and decision making (Hoolohan & Browne, 2020). Most notable among them, the Theory of Planned Behavior by Ajzen (1991) incorporates attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioral control to influence behavioral intention. However, its limitations include an inability to fully explain the gap between pro-environmental values and actual behaviors (Hargreaves, 2011; Kim & Damhorst, 1998; King et al., 2013). Investigating sustainability using an individualistic approach may not

fully account for contextual factors like external barriers that can influence decision-making processes (King et al., 2013). In contrast, practice-based approaches like Social Practice Theory (SPT) conceptualize behavior based on practical routines embedded in society rather than individual actions (Spotswood et al., 2017). By shifting the focus from individual behaviors to social practices, SPT enables a comprehensive analysis of sustainability issues, considering institutions, norms, and routines (Kennedy et al., 2015). In this dissertation, SPT provides a holistic examination of intention to patronize local retailers by consumers looking to purchase Fibershed affiliated products and can shed light on the drivers of this behavior.

History

Social practice theories constitute a heterogeneous body of literature that is interwoven with the history of sociology and philosophy. Social practice theories propose a different understanding of social action, asserting that action is driven by practice rather than mental structures (Kennedy et al., 2015). Practice based theories draw from the work of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, and Charles Taylor, and are bolstered by the contributions of Andreas Reckwitz and Theodore Schatzki (Nairn & Spotswood, 2015). There are multiple social science theories that aim to comprehend human behavior and social order, with *homo economicus* proposing a world of rational individuals and *homo sociologicus* emphasizing commonly accepted norms governing behavior (Reckwitz, 2002). Researchers sought alternative explanations of social life that included both individuals and structures (Schatzki, 2009). By drawing on the works of Bourdieu's Habitus and Giddens' theory of Structuration, practice theories emerged to emphasize the influence of social organization, power dynamics, routines, time, and norms on choices (Kennedy et al., 2015).

SPT draws on Pierre Bourdieu's habitus concept, representing a framework of dispositions continuously shaped by experiences that replicate structures through practices, not beliefs (Bourdieu, 1997, as cited in Sahakian & Wilhite, 2014; Shove et al., 2012). Habitus is both generative of social order and durably installed, meaning that it creates precedents for future practices and follows a predetermined logic (Kennedy et al., 2015). The concept emphasizes the unconscious reproduction of structures and the past's role in shaping and reforming practices (Shove et al., 2012). From an applied perspective, Giddens' (1986) Structuration Theory explored how social systems shape daily life while limiting the power to change underlying systems (Kennedy et al., 2015). Reckwitz (2002) conceptualized practice theory as a type of cultural theory emphasizing shared or collective symbolic structures of knowledge in understanding action and social order, focusing on the localization of the social and the interconnection of body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse, structure/process, and the individuals or groups involved in the practice. Warde (2005) was the first to introduce practice theory to study consumption, a process where individuals engage in various activities that involve both utilitarian and expressive purposes. According to Warde (2005), consumption offers repeated opportunities for individuals to participate in practices, such as shopping locally, which can lead to internalization and evolution of behaviors. Understanding, procedural knowledge, and engagement with the practice are essential components that contribute to changes in consumer behavior (Warde, 2005). Contemporary SPT research has broadened practice theory to include examination of sustainable consumption and climate change across various settings (Kennedy et al., 2015; Nairn & Spotswood, 2015).

As an outgrowth of practice theory, SPT specifically focuses on the routine behaviors or practices shared among individuals within societal structures, emphasizing the interconnected

elements that configure those practices (Ali, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2015). SPT views practices as coordinated actions guided by rules, shaping responses to others' actions such as shared understandings, norms, and expectations. For instance, the practice of questioning and the resulting answering are established norms or responses (Schatzki, 2009). SPT involves examining the smallest practices, their practical aspects, and their evolution over time (Campbell et al., 2023; Ng & Mark-Herbert, 2022). As Hargreaves (2011) posited:

The focus is no longer on individuals' attitudes, behaviours and choices, but instead on how practices form, how they are reproduced, maintained, stabilized, challenged and ultimately killed-off; on how practices recruit practitioners to maintain and strengthen them through continued performance, and on how such practitioners may be encouraged to defect to more sustainable practices (p. 84).

With contributions from scholars like Elizabeth Shove, Andreas Reckwitz, and Alan Ward, SPT offers a unique approach to studying consumer behavior, emphasizing the interplay of skills, meanings, materials, and social settings (Campbell et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2015; Nairn & Spotswood, 2015). According to Warde (2005), expertise on theories of practice cannot be attributed to any specific individual, with different scholars framing it differently. For the purpose of this dissertation, SPT is framed using Shove et al.'s (2012) structure, which includes three elements – materials, competences, and meanings - that actively combine to form practices.

SPT revolutionized behavior analysis by framing individuals as carriers of practices and shifting from individual-centric approaches to a broader focus on the practices themselves (Spotswood et al., 2017). Shove et al.'s (2012) seminal research underpins the inception, continuity, and termination of habitual practices, stressing their multi-layered dependence on the intricate interplay between materials, competences, and meanings. According to Shove et al.

(2012), “practices emerge, persist, shift, and disappear when connections between elements of these three types are made, sustained, or broken” (p. 14). For example, as explained by Shove et al. (2012), with regards to the evolution of driving practices, initially, the practice of driving was made challenging by the need for extensive mechanical knowledge to keep vehicles in motion, giving a specific meaning to the role of driver. As technological advancements occurred, particularly in the reliability of cars, the practice of driving was sustained by reducing the competences required from drivers. This shift allowed driving to become more accessible to a broader population, transforming the meaning of driving from a skill-intensive task to a more commonplace activity. The connections between material elements, competences, and meanings were thus made, sustained, and transformed over time, contributing to the evolution of driving practices.

Building on Reckwitz’s (2002) claims that the unit of analysis is shifted from individuals to groupings of bodies, things, competences, and cultural interpretations that comprise practices, individuals are the carriers of the practice, recreating standard patterns of accepted cultural representations and socially learned skills (Shove et al., 2012). The success of a practice in prompting someone to recreate it depends on the person’s ability, experience, and the social norms around how the practice should be conducted, with practices being followed or discontinued depending on how many individuals are sustaining the practice and the number of new individuals that are initiated or recruited to carry on the practice. If there is a change in any of the social norms around which the practice is conducted, then a change in way the practices are conducted may be prompted, and ultimately leading to cessation of the practice when it has no followers (Backhaus et al., 2015; Shove & Pantzar, 2007). As detailed in the example above regarding the social practice of driving, when driving was first introduced, cars were not very

reliable, and drivers needed to have substantial mechanical knowledge to be competent. Driving as a practice was done selectively by expert drivers, and competence was very important in terms of mechanical abilities. However, when cars became more reliable, the competence shifted from mechanical knowledge to competence in other driving practices. Per practice theory, old meanings change, and new meanings, materials, and competences come into being, changing the way a practice like driving has socially evolved from the time it began until the present.

As summarized in Table 2, SPT is comprised of four factors: materials, meanings, competences, and practices (Shove et al., 2012). Individuals dynamically interconnect meanings, materials, and competences to craft habitual routines (Shove et al., 2012). Materials encompass tangible aspects, including technological advancements, constituting fundamental components integral to practices. Thus, in the context of driving practices, materials are comprised of vehicles, roads, and technological enhancements, elucidating their substantial influence on driving engagements (Shove et al., 2012). Competences entail diverse skill sets and knowledge indispensable for effective engagement, reflecting varied proficiencies essential for practice participation. In the context of driving, competences incorporate the multifaceted skills and adaptability required for safe driving, and involve understanding traffic rules, handling a vehicle proficiently, and adapting to different driving conditions, highlighting the varied abilities needed to participate in the practice (Shove et al., 2012). Finally, meanings extend beyond physical actions to encompass broader societal, cultural, and personal interpretations, and therefore significantly shape attitudes and behaviors. In the practice of driving, meanings encompass broader societal perceptions and personal reflections beyond the physical act influencing driving attitudes. For instance, driving may represent autonomy, freedom, and convenience for some individuals, while for others, it may raise concerns about environmental impact, safety, and

community well-being (Shove et al., 2012). Social norms play an important role in determining how individuals become drivers, participate in the practice, and behave on the roads. These norms encompass speed limits, right-of-way rules, signaling, and courteous behavior and influence driving habits, from obeying traffic signals to yielding to pedestrians (Shove et al., 2012). These diverse meanings influence people's attitudes and behaviors concerning driving practices (Shove et al., 2012).

Table 2. Key Components of Social Practice Theory

Term	Definition	Examples
Materials	Physical entities, activities, motivations involved in a decision-making process.	Brick and mortar stores, online shopping, peer opinion, products, discounts.
Competences	Expertise, understanding, foundational knowledge, based on awareness, learned or deliberately cultivated, resulting in shared awareness of product, practice, or service.	Knowledge and awareness of garment industry, manufacturing processes, sustainability issues, online purchasing expertise.
Meanings	Mental activities, emotions, and motivational knowledge that represent the social and symbolic importance of involvement in a given instance.	Decision to buy clothes, what clothing represents in the context of work or leisure, and how it changes based on circumstances.
Practices	Result of links made between materials, competences, and meanings resulting in a particular action.	Purchasing clothing, acquiring fashion products, disposing of fashion products.

According to Shove et al. (2012), materials, competences, and meanings are interrelated in a practice and play a role in influencing the other elements. Changes to any one of the elements will impact the overall practice. For instance, advancements in electric vehicles reshape driving materials and technologies, influencing individual engagement and changes in social

norms, while emerging technologies like autonomous vehicles redefine competences and meanings, thereby revolutionizing the practice itself over time. The sections that follow provide a detailed explanation of each of the individual elements – materials, competences, meanings, and practices - relative to the purpose of this dissertation.

Materials

In SPT, materials are defined as physical entities that are tangible, such as objects, infrastructure, technologies, tools, or an individual's physical form (Shove et al., 2012). In a study on sustainable apparel consumption behavior by Ng and Mark-Herbert (2022), the authors define materials to include all activities and motivations involved in the decision making process of purchasing apparel, such as the type of garments available and product discounts. In a study by Vladimirova et al. (2022) on apparel consumption and sustainability during COVID-19, materials were linked to fashion acquisition practices, such as closing of brick-and-mortar stores, supply chain disruptions, event cancellations, and remote working. In a study by Spotswood et al. (2015) on utility cycling, the materials included are access to bicycles, cycle paths to ensure safety and segregation from car traffic, and the availability of refreshment facilities at workplaces to prepare for work after cycling. In the context of this dissertation, materials include the local retailer and locally produced Fibershed affiliated products.

Competences

Competences refer to any expertise, foundational knowledge, or understanding that play crucial roles in shared awareness of a product, action, or service. Competences can be either practical awareness, or deliberately cultivated, learned, or collectively accepted standards of proficient performance upon which specific actions are assessed (Shove et al., 2012). For the purpose of SPT, all forms of understanding and practical knowledge are grouped together and

referred to as *competence* in order to forge links between the different elements of practice (Shove et al., 2012). In the study by Ng and Mark-Herbert (2022), competences include consumers' knowledge and awareness of sustainability of garments and the apparel industry. According to Vladimirova et al. (2022), COVID-19 necessitated that consumers move to new modes of purchasing, like shopping online or learning new skills like sewing and mending. In terms of competences required to perform cycling as a practice, individuals need to learn the skill of cycling efficiently and confidently, be able to traverse risky paths, manage the storage and maintenance of bicycles, as well as address appearance expectations after cycling to work (Spotswood et al., 2015). In the context of this dissertation, competences include consumer awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production. By understanding and assessing these competences, this dissertation seeks to understand the connection between consumers' knowledge and their perceptions of the sustainability practices adopted by local retailers offering Fibershed affiliated products.

Meanings

Meanings include mental activities, emotions, and motivational knowledge that represent the social and symbolic importance of involvement in a given instance (Shove et al., 2012). Certain practices are carried out because they have social or symbolic reasons like social norms, traditions, or cultural associations (Vladimirova et al., 2022). Shove et al. (2012) clarify that in the context of SPT, meanings are considered to be an element of practice and not something that drive action. Ng and Mark-Herbert (2022) positioned meanings as the factors that influence participants' decisions to buy clothes, which could range from price, quality, and brand names to the perceived value of products. In the study by Vladimirova et al. (2022), the meanings associated with apparel consumption have changed because of COVID-19, in that the necessity

of clothing in the way it was traditionally seen was called into question. In the study on cycling by Spotswood et al. (2015), meanings are associated with the practical benefits in terms of a quick and economically beneficial mode of transportation, avoiding traffic jams, as well as projecting the image of an individual who is healthy and principled. For the purpose of this dissertation, meanings encompass consumers' community attachment, their need for uniqueness, and their perceptions of local retailers' sustainability efforts and authenticity. Meanings are not just drivers of action, but integral elements within the practice itself, shaping individuals' decisions and behaviors in the realm of sustainable consumption. Understanding the connections between consumers' values and perceptions and the adoption of sustainable practices by local retailers will help to identify the factors that contribute to their intentions to patronize local retailers that offer Fibershed affiliated products.

Practices

Practices are shaped by the connections between materials, competences, and meanings. These individual elements each have their own historic trajectories and styles of transmission, in that they can exist on their own in addition to the practices they have evolved into or become a part of (Shove et al., 2012). This simplified approach has advantages, but it assumes that elements necessary for a practice to come into being exist in the world waiting to be linked together, and when the links are no longer sustained, the practice disintegrates (Shove et al., 2012). As Shove et al. (2012) state,

If specific configurations are to remain effective, connections between defining elements have to be renewed time and again. This suggests that stability and routinization are not end points of a linear process of normalization. Rather, they should be understood as

ongoing accomplishments in which similar elements are repeatedly linked together in similar ways.

In the study by Ng and Mark-Herbert (2022), links were made between different elements in the act of purchasing clothing. Findings revealed that current practices are not conducive to the purchase of sustainable clothing due to several factors, such as lack of knowledge, price, and style considerations, and more effort is required by the industry to increase sustainability awareness among consumers. By interlinking the different elements related to the practice of utility cycling, Spotswood et al. (2015) suggested that SPT can be a useful tool to conceptualize an activity by enabling the researcher to take an abstract view of the behavior to be studied. In doing so, the individual is no longer the unit of measurement in the study, instead it is the practice itself that becomes the principal unit of behavior. In the context of this dissertation, the practice shaped by the interconnection of materials, meanings, and competences is the patronage of local retailers selling locally produced, sustainable (i.e., Fibershed affiliated) products.

Extension of Social Practice Theory

Social Practice Theory (SPT) has found application across diverse disciplines, which reveals its versatility for analyzing practices and understanding human behaviors. In the realm of sustainability studies, Sahakian and Wilhite (2014) expanded SPT within energy consumption contexts, integrating practices among individual actions, material elements, and social contexts, thereby providing insight into sustainable consumption practices. Holtz (2014) extended SPT by presenting a conceptual framework and a stimulation model aimed at investigating the emergence of social practices and identifying reasons as to why it is hard to change habits and behaviors, shedding light on the challenges inherent to altering social practices and consumption habits.

Hess et al. (2018) analyzed individual, social, and material influences on energy consumption behaviors. Employing SPT and psychological concepts, the study analyzed two everyday practices – washing and drying clothes, and showering - and found that individual values, the materials involved, and the importance an individual places on specific processes, materials and outcomes collectively, together created variations in performance and explained the differences in energy consumption behaviors.

Examining shifts in consumer behavior during COVID-19, Zollet et al. (2022) employed SPT to examine the role of materials, meanings, and competences in encouraging sustainable consumption practices in areas such as food, material consumption, housing, and mobility. Vladimirova et al. (2022) analyzed changes in clothing consumption, applying SPT to explain apparel acquisition trends across various countries during the pandemic.

Studies on sustainable consumption in both food and fashion have employed SPT to explore factors influencing behaviors and to propose changes in behaviors. For example, Marwood et al. (2023) investigated food waste and pro-environmental behavior, suggesting a layered policy approach addressing wider pro-environmental behavior to address food-related actions and reduce food waste frequencies. Backhaus et al. (2015) analyzed how the materials, meanings, and competences related to purchase of local, seasonal, or organic vegetables, fruits, and meat interacted to outline the practice of sustainable food consumption. Piscicelli et al. (2015) examined collaborative consumption, exploring the influence of individual values on social practices within Ecomodo, a UK based online marketplace where different users are able to lend and borrow their belongings, expertise, and spaces.

SPT has been applied to study diverse practices, including agriculture, architecture, and business. For example, Campbell et al. (2023) examined area-wide weed management in

cropping systems, unraveling routine practices and interconnections between materials, competences, and meanings. King et al. (2013) utilized SPT to understand how the behavior of occupants in sustainable office buildings influence post-occupancy evaluations. Naeem et al. (2022) explored mobile banking adoption among vulnerable populations, investigating competence, meaning, and material interconnections during a crisis.

SPT is useful because it helps in understanding sustainable consumption due to its focus on the habitual and contextual nature of human behavior. By examining how sustainable consumption practices are embedded within broader social routines and contexts, SPT explains the interactions between individuals, society, and the environment and the understanding of the factors influencing sustainable consumption behaviors (Shove et al., 2012). The next section further explains the use of SPT to address the overarching aim of the dissertation, which is to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. By grounding the study in SPT, this dissertation seeks to understand consumer intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated not merely as individual actions, but as embedded practices within larger societal contexts. This understanding will help to position the local retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework.

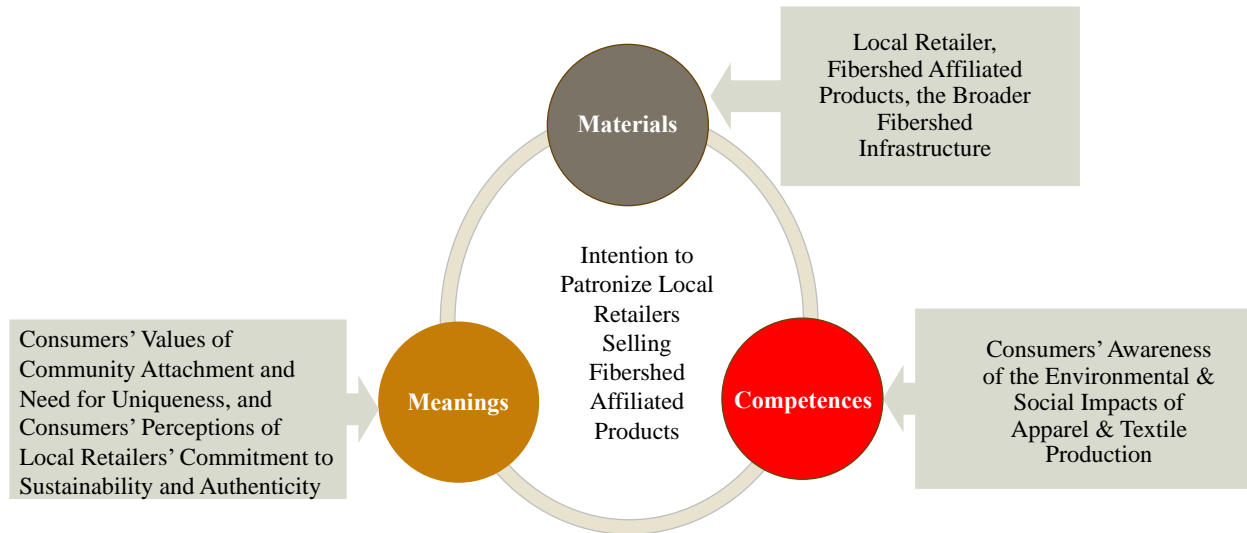
SPT as a Framework to Examine Consumers' Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers

Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

As stated in Chapter I, Objective 2 aims to investigate consumers' awareness of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Building on the discussion of the literature on sustainable retailing, sustainable apparel consumption, and SPT presented in the previous sections, and based on the purpose of this study, SPT can be used as a theoretical lens to understand consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed

affiliated products using the three elements of materials, meanings, and competences, as well as the interconnections between them. Figure 11 provides a brief overview of how the three elements combine to form the practice.

Figure 11. Elements of the Practice of Intention to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products



Note: Adapted from Shove et al. (2012)

Materials are tangible elements of consumption behavior and include all activities and motivations involved in the decision-making process (Ng & Mark-Herbert, 2022). In the context of this dissertation, the materials under consideration relate to the local retailer that sells Fibershed affiliated products. *Meanings* are the mental activities, emotions, and motivational knowledge representing the social and symbolic importance of involvement in an activity (Shove et al., 2012). For the purpose of this dissertation, consumers' values of community attachment and need for uniqueness, as well as their perceptions of the local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity are the motivating factors that influence their intentions. *Competences* include all forms of understandings and practical knowledge that are required to

make links between the different elements of practice (Shove et al., 2012). For the purpose of this dissertation, competences include consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production and consumption.

According to Shove et al. (2012), *practices* are formed by the interconnections between three key elements: materials, competences, and meanings. In the context of this study, the practice of intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products is envisaged to emerge from linking: (1) meanings, such as consumers' values of attachment to community and need for uniqueness, and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity; (2) materials involved, such as the local retailer itself and the Fibershed affiliated products being sold; and (3) competences required, such as awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production practices. By connecting these three elements of meanings, materials, and competences, consumers' intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products can theoretically emerge as a social practice.

Social norms manifest as implicit rules and expectations within the community regarding sustainable consumption behaviors and support for local businesses, and may influence individuals' perceptions and behaviors in several ways. Social norms may dictate that individuals within a community should support local retailers and prioritize sustainable consumption practices. This expectation is reinforced through social interactions, cultural values, and community norms that emphasize the importance of environmental stewardship and community well-being. Individuals may conform to social norms surrounding sustainable consumption behaviors due to peer pressure or the desire for social acceptance. Observing others within their social network patronizing local retailers and engaging in sustainable and community building practices can motivate individuals to align their own behaviors with these norms. Individuals

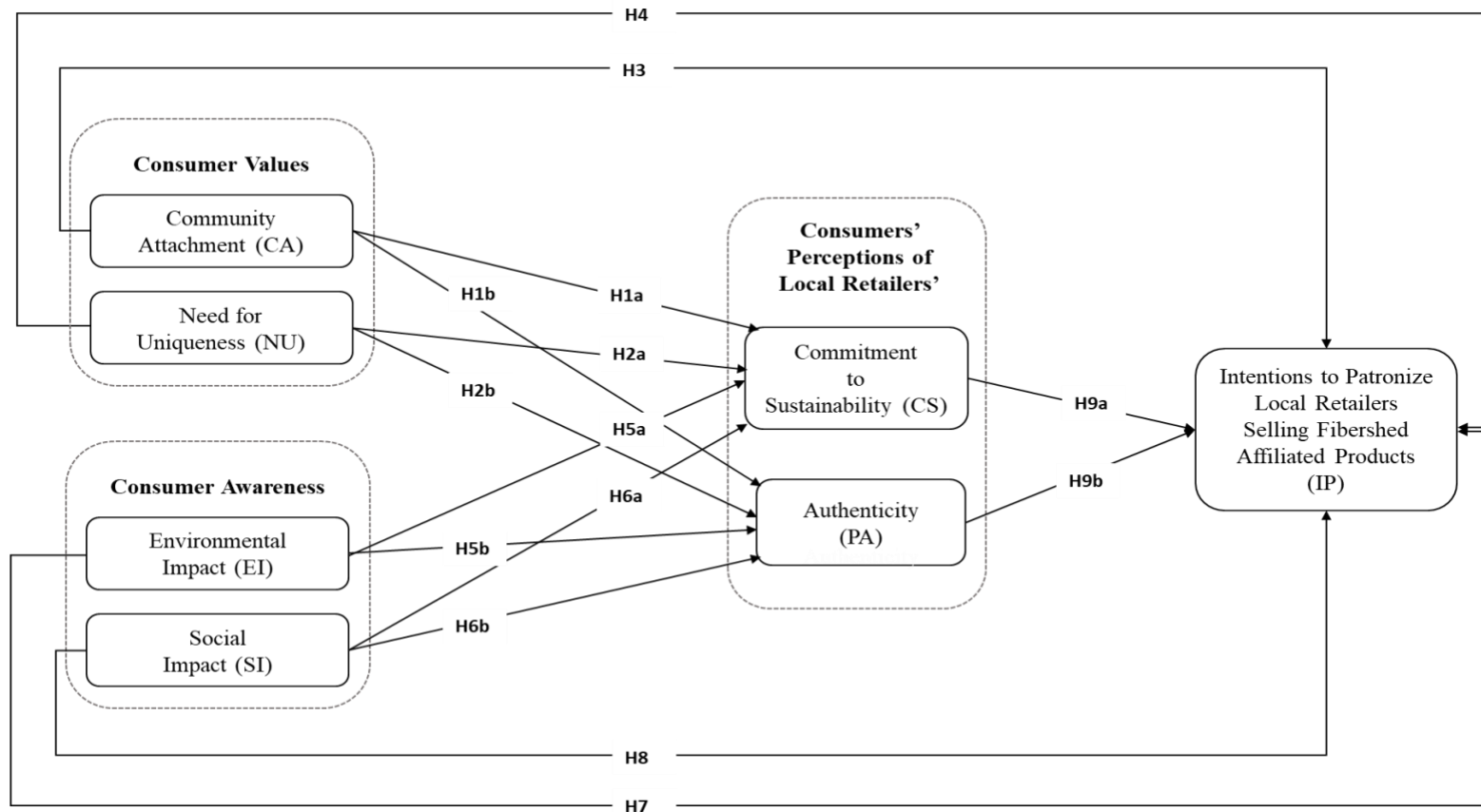
driven by a need for uniqueness may choose to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products over mainstream retail establishments, using this choice as a means of expressing their distinctiveness while also aligning with sustainability and community-centric values, thereby reinforcing their unique identity within their social groups. The different dimensions of the individual elements discussed in this dissertation have their own historic trajectories and styles of transmission, and yet when they interlink, they become a practice: that of consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Conceptual Model

To explore the role of local retailers within Fibershed and the S2S Framework, an objective of this dissertation (Objective 2) was to investigate consumers' awareness of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Based on the discussion of the literature presented in this chapter, and considering the tenets of Social Practice Theory, a conceptual framework was developed to guide the main study (Figure 12). The framework depicts the relationships between the constructs, which are tested via Hypotheses 1 through 9. A detailed explanation of each hypothesis is provided following the description of the figure.

Figure 12: Conceptual Model

Consumers' Community Attachment, Need for Uniqueness, and Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production on Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability, Authenticity, and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products



Based on the previously discussed literature, the conceptual model proposes that consumer values (i.e., community attachment and need for uniqueness), and consumer awareness (i.e., the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production), are related to consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, as well as consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The following section details each hypothesis to be tested.

Hypotheses Development

Based on the conceptual model, nine hypotheses were developed, which are discussed in detail below.

The Effect of Consumer Values of Community Attachment and Need for Uniqueness on Consumer Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability, Authenticity, and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

As discussed previously in this chapter, *values* are intrinsic, enduring beliefs that comprise the foundational ethical and moral principles within an individual, exerting a substantial influence on their behavior and decision-making across various aspects of life (Kahle, 1983; Schwartz, 1992). *Consumer perception* is defined as the process of the consumer understanding the environment through their senses, involving awareness, comprehension, and interpretation of various stimuli, and can significantly differ among individuals or groups (Rath et al., 2014). Consumer perceptions are subjective, represent individual interpretations, and shape reality (Kerin & Hartley, 2023; Rath et al., 2014). An individual's values and perceptions therefore serve as the lens through which they form interpretations (Kerin & Hartley, 2023; Rath et al., 2014).

Consumers' Community Attachment and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity

Previous studies have observed that the value of community attachment plays a significant role in shaping an individual's perceptions and decision making (Handelman & Bello, 2004). According to the study by Nasr et al. (2022) in the context of tourism, destination social responsibility has a positive relationship with residents' community attachment, involvement, and environmentally responsible behavior. Individuals may seek a sense of community from local retailers, and local retailers, through their community-focused CSR efforts and sustainability initiatives, may strive to present themselves as deeply connected to the local community (Miller & Besser, 2000). Consumers are exposed to retailers' sustainability efforts through various means, including local product assortments, sustainability of the supply chain and within the procurement process, and the store employees' commitment to sustainability (Mauri et al., 2022). When retailers participate in local or philanthropic activities, consumers with higher levels of community attachment perceive these retailers as being sustainable and engaged with their local community (Briggs et al., 2016). Consumers who have higher levels of community attachment may perceive local retailers to have a stronger commitment to sustainability (Dabija & Băbuț, 2019). Therefore, it is hypothesized that community attachment will positively influence consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (see Figure 13).

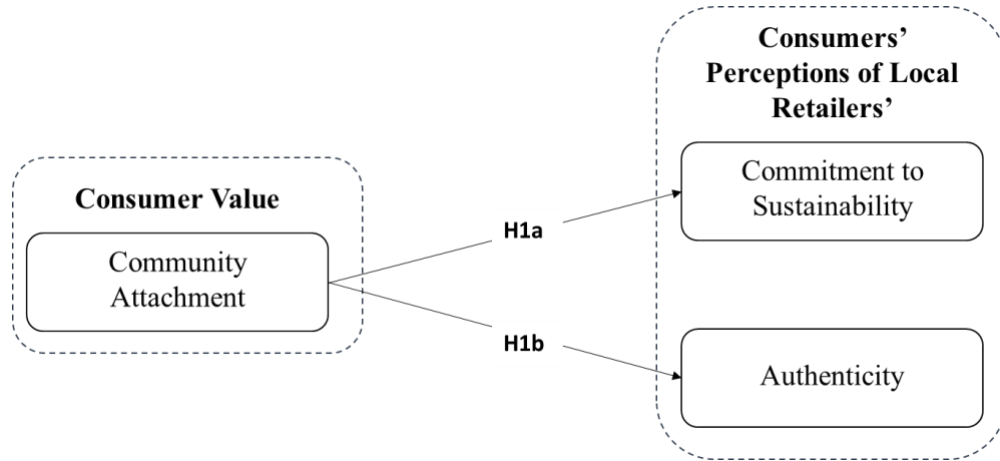
H1a - Consumer values related to community attachment will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability.

Retailers that emphasize qualities like heritage, genuineness, originality, place, and social commitment are perceived by consumers to be authentic (Beverland, 2005; Cuesta-Valino et al.,

2022). According to Beverland (2005), connection to a place represents authenticity because it upholds traditions. Although there is lack of extensive literature related to community attachment and authenticity related to locally produced apparel and textiles, in the context of tourism, authenticity is frequently linked to the local area or place of origin, driven by tourists' motivations to immerse themselves in local culture (Chhabra, 2005). In the case of revitalized downtowns hosting a variety of unique retailers, professional services, restaurants, and entertainment venues, the authenticity and distinctiveness of such locations fosters a sense of place, strengthening consumers' attachment to the local community and local businesses, and influencing their perceptions of retailers' commitment and authenticity (Wilson, 2018). These findings support the idea that sense of place is important to shaping consumers' perceptions of authenticity, as individuals seek cultural experiences that are genuinely rooted in the unique characteristics of a specific location. Therefore, it is proposed that there is a positive relationship between consumers' community attachment and their perceptions of retailers' authenticity (see Figure 13).

H1b - Consumer values related to community attachment will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity.

Figure 13. Consumers' Community Attachment and their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity



Consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity

Need for uniqueness is an individual's desire to be distinct from others in terms of the possession and display of material objects (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Seo & Lang, 2019). Consumers that value uniqueness seek to create an identity that is distinct from others based on their consumption choices according to their desire for self-expression, or their need to be seen as nonconformist or distinct (Andrei et al., 2017; Tian et al., 2001). According to Wu et al. (2012), consumers' need for uniqueness can be satisfied by acquiring rare products, which creates a perception of scarcity and exclusivity. Research has found relationships between consumers' need for uniqueness and their sustainability perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Tascioglu et al., 2017). For example, according to Lang and Armstrong (2018) consumers with a need for uniqueness perceive retailers who engage in

clothing swap events to be sustainable. Similarly, consumers who value uniqueness have positive perceptions of those retailers they view to be socially sustainable because they donate to charity, give recognition to their employees who volunteer in the community, and donate their products to people in need (Tascioglu et al., 2017). Consumers view these retailers as sources for products that will help them be unique among their peers (Tascioglu et al., 2017). Therefore, it was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness and their perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability (see Figure 14).

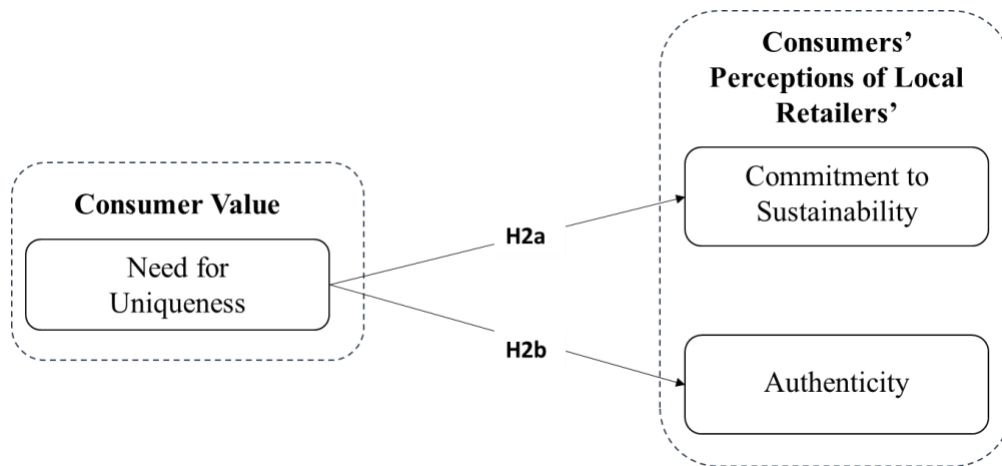
H2a - Consumer values related to need for uniqueness will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability.

Consumers with a high need for uniqueness seek products and distinct designs that set them apart from others and express their individuality (Cheema & Kaikati, 2006; Noble et al., 2006). Local retailers may emphasize distinctive and locally-inspired products, or highlight collaborations with local artisans or communities, thereby showcasing their local ties (Beverland, 2005). Authenticity encompasses the making of high-quality items through handcrafted processes, collaborating with local artisans, producing products with distinct idiosyncrasies based on materials and processes used, and maintaining transparency in sourcing, production, and marketing (Jung, 2014), including vintage products belonging to specific periods (Cervellon et al., 2012). When retailers offer well-made, creatively designed, and reasonably priced local products that cater to diverse consumers, they align with the fashion-conscious preferences of individuals who seek unique styles that cater to their need to be different. Consumers who display high need for uniqueness tend to value originality and distinctiveness, which are normally considered characteristics of local retailers. Consumers appreciate the originality and perceive such retailers to be authentic (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Therefore, it is hypothesized that

there is a positive relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness and their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity (see Figure 14).

H2b - Consumers' values related to need for uniqueness will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity.

Figure 14. Consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity



The Effect of Consumers' Community Attachment and Need for Uniqueness on Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

According to Wilson and Hodges (2022), community-oriented consumers that value local connections and civic engagement perceive shopping locally as a form of activism that positively influences the community. The commitment of local business owners to build community through partnerships further strengthens the bond between consumers and local retailers, emphasizing the important role of community attachment in shopping locally (Miller, 2001). According to Skippari et al. (2017), a higher level of community attachment leads to increased local store patronage, influenced by the vitality of local services, potential for social interaction, and overall satisfaction. According to Noble et al. (2006), ethical consumers feel it is their moral

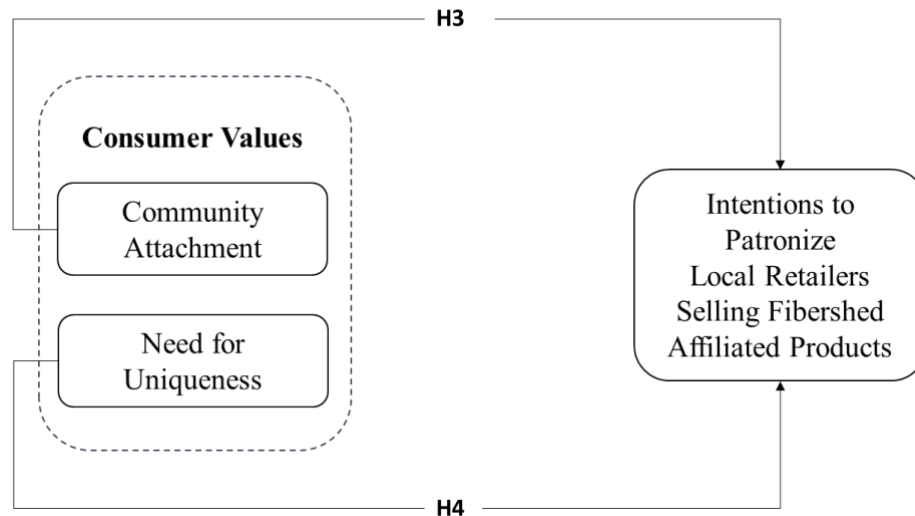
obligation to help local retailers in business, and consequently shop from them. Consumers may perceive that local businesses are more embedded in the community, and as such, they may choose to shop locally to benefit the community (Landry et al., 2005; Wilson, 2018). Consumers' attachment towards their community influences their shopping behaviors (Kim & Stoel, 2010). Local retailers tend to offer a more unique and eclectic product mix by customizing their merchandise assortments to more narrowly defined segments, which is typically not the case with nonlocal merchants. This approach allows local retailers to cater to the specific needs and preferences of their target customers within the community (Noble et al., 2006).

The concept of Fibershed emphasizes the importance of supporting regional communities and fostering sustainable practices within local economies (Fibershed, n.d.). By patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products, consumers actively contribute to the preservation and revitalization of their communities. Additionally, Fibershed promotes the production of unique and artisanal products sourced locally, which resonates with consumers who value the need for uniqueness. These consumers seek out products that reflect their individuality and personal values, and local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products fulfill this need by offering distinctive and customized merchandise tailored to the preferences of their community members. Prior studies have established the relationship between consumer values and behavioral intentions (Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Lundblad & Davies, 2016; Manchiraju & Sadachar, 2014;). Therefore, as indicated in Figure 15, it was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' community attachment, their need for uniqueness, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

H3 - Consumer values related to community attachment will have a positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

H4 - Consumer values related to the need for uniqueness will have a positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Figure 15. Consumers' Community Attachment, Need for Uniqueness, and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products



The Effect of Consumers' Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Apparel and Textile Production on Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability, Authenticity, and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

Environmental awareness is an important factor in sustainable consumption behavior. For example, consumers who have a high interest in environmental issues are motivated to purchase eco-friendly products (Kim & Lee, 2023). When consumers are aware of environmental issues and they believe that their personal behavior will contribute to solving environmental problems, it generally impacts their consumption behaviors (Connell & Kozar, 2014; Gam, 2011).

Consumers form strong attachments to retailers that they perceive to be committed to sustainable practices (Sanchez-Gonzales et al., 2020). Moreover, according to Tascioglu et al. (2017), there

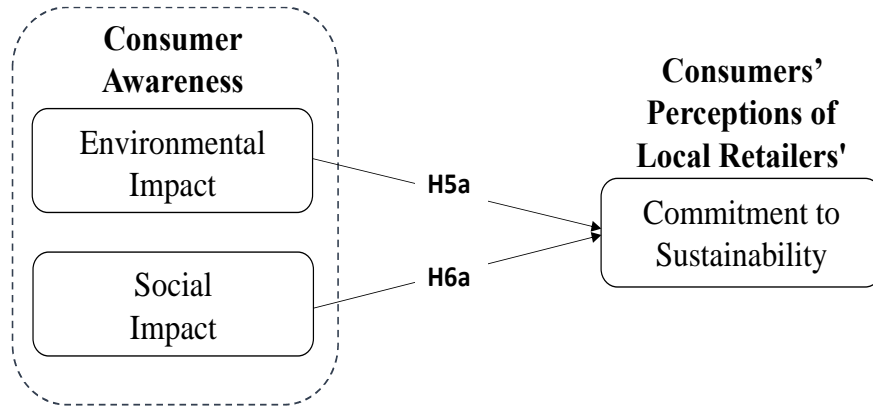
is a positive link between consumers' motivations for social status and their perceptions of retailers' environmental and social sustainability.

The proliferation of fast fashion has led to manufacturing practices that are detrimental to the well-being of workers in the fashion industry (Fletcher 2010). An increased awareness of unsafe factories, poor working conditions, and unfair labor practices in apparel and textile manufacturing have made social and ethical issues more important to consumers (Perez et al., 2022). As a result, consumers are increasingly demanding products manufactured in ethical conditions (Goworek, 2011). As consumers increasingly prioritize sustainability and ethical considerations, their awareness of retailers' practices in these domains becomes a crucial factor influencing their perceptions as well as their behaviors. For example, local retailers who sell locally produced goods are thought to be more pro-environmental and support social causes within the local community (Im & Lee, 2023). Consumers who are more aware of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production may have favorable perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability. Therefore, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production and their perceptions of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (see Figure 16).

H5a - Consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability.

H6a - Consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability.

Figure 16. Consumer Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Apparel and Textile Production and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability



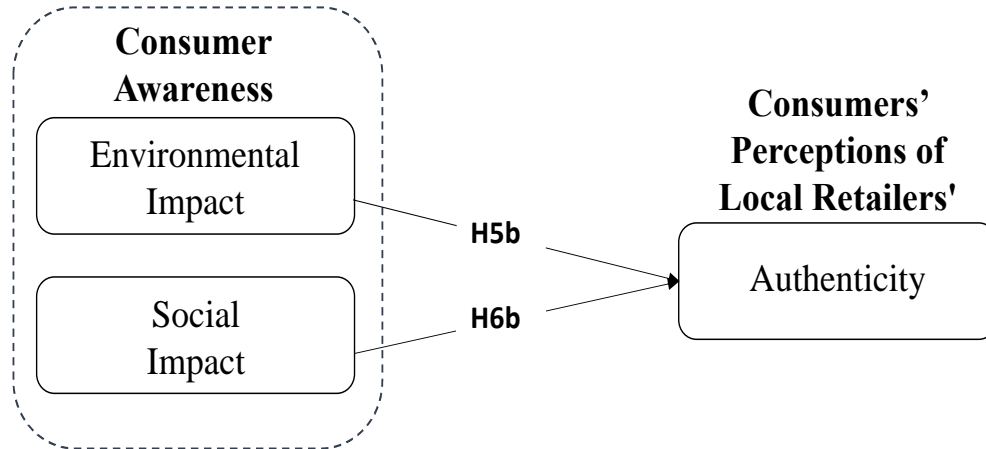
According to Kennedy et al. (2016), when a retailer makes sustainability a core business consideration, rather than treating it as just one of several objectives or putting it behind goals like profit or market share, then that retailer is perceived to be authentic in its sustainability initiatives. Moreover, when a retailer communicates and implements a well-defined strategic approach to sustainability, it is perceived to be more authentic, and in turn, engender consumers' trust (Kennedy et al., 2016). According to Jung and Jin (2016), because local artisans produce apparel in small batches and in local settings, they are perceived to be more authentic. Consumers who appreciate authenticity have a more favorable attitude to products that are manufactured or sold by local retailers and, in turn, perceive such retailers to be authentic (Jung, 2014). It follows that consumers who are aware of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production are more likely to understand the importance of apparel produced using slow fashion methods and to perceive local retailers who sell these products as authentic. Therefore, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' awareness

of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production and their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity (see Figure 17).

H5b - Consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity.

H6B - Consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity.

Figure 17. Consumer Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Apparel and Textile Production and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Authenticity



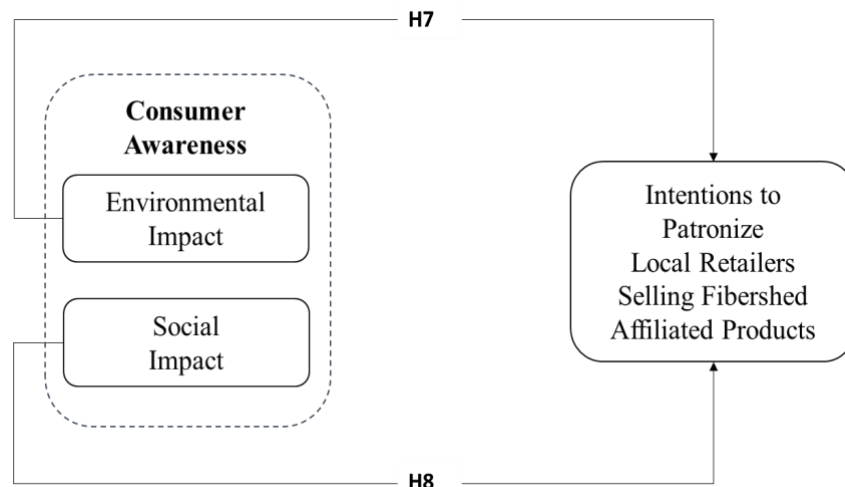
As consumers have become more informed about the detrimental effects of conventional apparel manufacturing on the environment and society, they have sought alternatives that align with their values and contribute to positive social and environmental outcomes (Fletcher, 2010). Consumers' awareness of ethical issues influences their perceptions of retailers that they perceive as contributing to social and environmental sustainability (Sanchez-Gonzales et al., 2020). Thus, retailers who are authentically sustainable and follow practices that are socially responsible gain a competitive edge that moves beyond price and promotions to build customer patronage and loyalty (Kennedy et al., 2016). One way to be authentically sustainable is to sell

Fibershed affiliated products, as doing so supports Fibershed's goals of promoting regenerative textile systems and fostering community-based economies. Likewise, supporting local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products not only contributes to these goals, but also facilitates the transition towards a more sustainable supply chain. Prior studies have found a positive relationship between consumer awareness and behavioral intentions (Lee & Shin, 2010; Preuit & Yan, 2017). Therefore, it follows that consumers who are aware of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production may be more likely to patronize local retailers who sell Fibershed affiliated products. Therefore, it was hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (see Figure 18).

H7 - Consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

H8 - Consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production will have a positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Figure 18. Consumers’ Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Apparel and Textile Production and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products



The Effect of Consumers’ Perceptions of Local Retailers’ Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity on Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

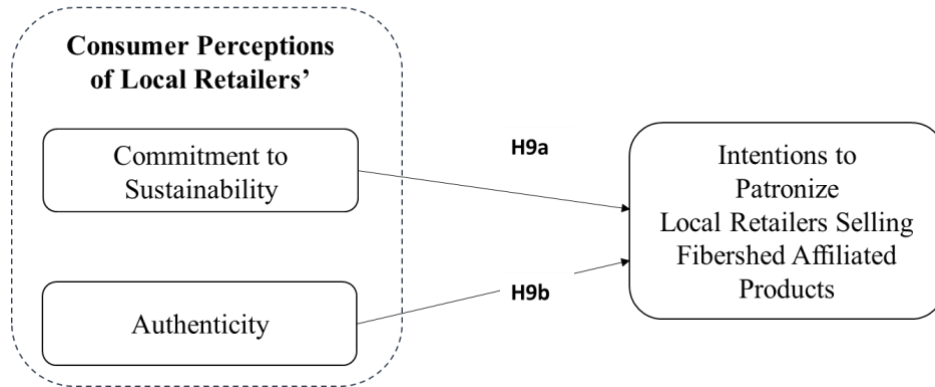
Prior research has highlighted the essential role of local retailers in the community, emphasizing their active involvement in local events and collaborations within the community (Briggs et al., 2016; Peters & Bodkin, 2021), providing authentic experiences to their consumers (Beverland, 2005), and engaging in sustainable practices (Jones et al., 2005; Mauri et al., 2022). Such factors can foster consumers’ attachment to these establishments and strengthen their intentions to support and patronize them. Moreover, consumers’ patronage of local retailers is influenced by various factors, including their perceptions of personalized service, community engagement, convenience, as well as the availability of products and services that more closely align with their preferences (Noble et al., 2006; Skippari et al., 2017; Wilson & Hodges, 2022).

The distinct advantage of local retailers lies in their ability to evaluate and adjust to customers' needs and provide them unique products and services alongside convenience and personalized attention. Benefits include customer loyalty (Pandey et al., 2015), word of mouth recommendations (Cuesta-Valino et al., 2022), and a willingness to buy (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2008; Sivapalan et al., 2021). Fibershed's goals of promoting sustainable systems and fostering community-based economies align with the attributes that consumers perceive to be associated with local retailers. It follows that consumers who view local retailers as embodying sustainability practices and authenticity may be more likely to support local retailers that sell Fibershed affiliated products. Prior studies have established the relationship between consumer perceptions and their apparel consumption behaviors (Connell, 2011; Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Mauri et al., 2022). Therefore, it is hypothesized that there is a positive relationship between consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (see Figure 19).

H9a - Consumers' perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability will have a positive influence on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

H9b - Consumers' perceptions of retailers' authenticity will have a positive influence on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Figure 19. Consumer Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability, Authenticity, and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products



Summary

This chapter provided a review of the extant literature relevant to the topic of this dissertation. Studies on the apparel supply chain, sustainable retailing, sustainable apparel consumption, and Social Practice Theory were discussed. The conceptual model was explained and hypotheses were presented. The next chapter discusses the research design that was implemented in the dissertation.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to address the purpose and objectives of this dissertation. As discussed in Chapter I, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore the local retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework. To address this purpose, the following research objectives were developed:

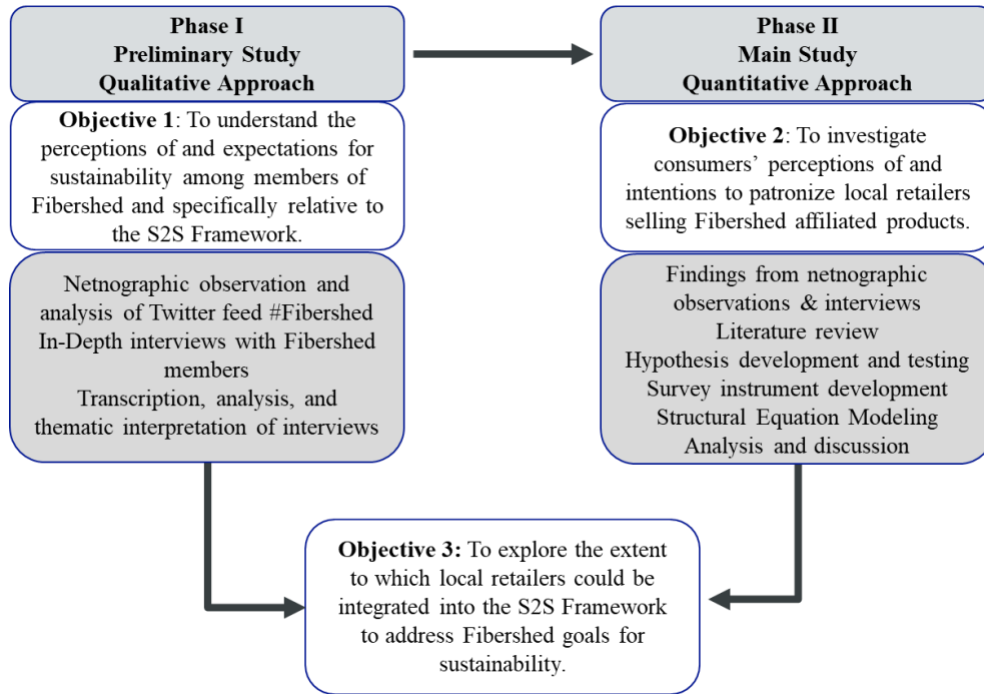
1. To understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of Fibershed and specifically relative to the S2S Framework.
2. To investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.
3. To explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to address Fibershed goals for sustainability.

To address the purpose and objectives of this dissertation, a research design comprised of two phases was implemented. In the first phase, a qualitative study was conducted to identify views on sustainability among Fibershed members, which addressed the first objective of the study (i.e., *to understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members at different points in the Fibershed supply chain and specifically relative to the S2S Framework*). A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate to address this objective, given that the aim was to understand the perceptions and expectations for sustainability among participants and was exploratory in nature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hodges, 2011). That is, qualitative researchers use methods that focus on understanding the experiences of participants based on the social and cultural contexts within which they live, work, and interact (Given, 2008). Phase I of the qualitative study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, a netnography of the Twitter

feed #fibershed was conducted to identify the various stakeholders within the Fibershed organization. The findings from the netnographic study were used to inform the second stage, which was in-depth interviews with different stakeholders within the Fibershed S2S Framework.

The information learned from Phase I (the qualitative study), as well as the literature review (Chapter II), helped to identify factors tested in Phase II. In Phase II, which is the main dissertation study, a structured questionnaire was developed to investigate consumers' perceptions and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, thereby addressing the second objective (i.e., *to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products*). Finally, integrating the results from the Phase I qualitative study and the results of the survey in Phase II, the third objective will be addressed (i.e., *to explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to address Fibershed goals for sustainability*) through the discussion of the findings relative to the theoretical framework guiding the study. Figure 20 illustrates the structure of the research design.

Figure 20. Research Design Process



In this chapter, the following sections provide an overview of the methodology of this dissertation: (1) Phase I: Preliminary Qualitative Study, (2) Phase II: Main Dissertation Study, (3) Sample Selection and Data Collection Process, (4) Statistical Analysis, and (5) Summary.

Phase I: Preliminary Study

As discussed in Chapter I, Phase I of the dissertation employed a qualitative approach using netnographic observation of the Twitter feed #Fibershed and in-depth interviews. As very little is known about Fibershed as a sustainable supply chain alternative, and the purpose of the preliminary study was to explore Fibershed stakeholder perceptions, a qualitative exploratory research design was deemed appropriate. This approach is appropriate when very little is known about a phenomenon and the research is aimed at gathering more insights and understanding about a phenomenon, rather than testing a hypothesis or predicting outcomes (Denzin & Lincoln,

2000; Hodges, 2011; Merriam, 1998). As Creswell (2009) posited, qualitative research is more appropriate for exploring and understanding meanings, and quantitative studies are more suited to testing theories by examining relationships among variables that can be measured.

After an extensive review of the Fibershed website (Fibershed, n.d.) and other related resources available online, a structured netnographic observation of the Twitter feed #fibershed was conducted to understand the different Fibershed stakeholders who use Twitter. The netnographic observation was followed by in-depth interviews with Fibershed members to understand their perceptions of and views on sustainability with regards to Fibershed and specifically related to the S2S Framework.

Netnographic Observation

Netnography, an online ethnographic method, has emerged as a valuable tool for understanding consumer behavior. The netnographic approach entails observing digital cultures, encompassing studies of both communities online and online communities, revealing offline social phenomena and interactions, and those solely formed through online engagements (Dover & Kelman, 2018; Kozinets, 2010). This method involves monitoring online posts, gathering information from social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, and analyzing communication as a means to understand patterns and trends (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kozinets, 2015). Kozinets (2002) outlined steps for conducting a netnographic study, starting with gaining entry into the online community followed by data collection encompassing observation of interactions. Data collected in the form of posts are analyzed using methods like content or thematic analysis. Kozinets (2002) emphasized adherence to ethical guidelines to ensure consent and privacy, as well as the use of member checks for validation and feedback.

Björk and Kauppinen-Räsänen (2012) delineated four roles for researchers in netnography

based on the researchers' level of participation and notification: lurker, observer, spy, and participant. Level of participation refers to the researcher's engagement in the online discourse, ranging from passive observation, where they do not take part in the online interactions, to active participation, where they directly engage in and contribute to the topic under discussion. Distinct from this, the level of notification refers to how the researcher discloses their identity and seeks informed consent from participants, ensuring the online community is aware that their posts may be collected for research purposes (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012). *Lurkers* maintain a passive and covert presence, observing online interactions without revealing their identity. *Observers* inform the platform about their research role but refrain from active engagement, while *spies* participate incognito, and *participants* explicitly engage in discussions, shaping the researcher's strategy within the netnographic study. For the purpose of this study, the lurking role was adopted and passive observation was conducted without direct participation in online discussions (Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2012).

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook are some of the popular social media sites that Fibershed has a presence on. However, it is difficult to use Facebook and Instagram as compared to Twitter for extensive research due to limited access to user data. Platforms that provide easy access to user data are more often used in research studies (Tenkanen et al., 2017). Sites like Instagram are more photo-centric, therefore information about stakeholders is minimal (Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020). Twitter, on the other hand, is a microblogging social network site where news, information, and hashtags are combined and used to make different discussions visible (Orminski et al., 2021). Twitter serves as a platform for creating social ties and sharing information centered around specific interests, projects, themes, or activities, termed as “organizational social enterprises,” fostering supportive, informational, and content-based

interactions (Kozinets, 2015). Twitter has an estimated base of 415 million users as of 2023, with over 95 million of them in the United States (Statista, 2024). Given Twitter's unique combination of microblogging features, extensive user base, and its role as a platform for fostering supportive, informational, and content-based interactions, it was deemed an appropriate site for studying the social ties and discussions centered around Fibershed.

According to Kozinets (2015), one way of finding and collecting netnographic data is through archival data, which refers to data already recorded and stored. Archival data in netnography involves gathering information from online social experiences within social media communities without direct interaction by the researcher (Kozinets, 2015). This data, collected in different ways, provides an historical record and cultural baseline for understanding the context of the research (Kozinets, 2015). The archival function allows for anonymity and flexibility in observing social dynamics before making decisions to engage directly (Kozinets, 2015). Therefore, netnographic observation of archival data on Twitter, utilizing the search term #Fibershed was employed to examine online interactions and discern the different stakeholders within the online Fibershed community (Kozinets, 2010; Kozinets & Gambetti, 2020). This approach facilitated understanding of the diverse individuals and groups engaged, including ranchers, farmers, designers, and related organizations, thereby helping to inform the selection of interview participants representing various perspectives on Fibershed.

Kozinets (2015) stated that a researcher aiming for a broader perspective and examining the overall cultural landscape online may likely use data analysis software to help organize the larger amounts of data such research entails. In this case, Twitter data was collected using the web scraper tool Apify (Apify, n.d.). On September 24, 2023, the *Easy Twitter Search Scraper* in Apify was used to gather the Twitter data by entering the search term 'fibershed' with a limit set

to 10,000 tweets and no other filters related to date ranges, languages, or users. The query returned a result of 6,185 tweets from June 2009 to September 2023. The resulting dataset included the following fields: the full name, username, the avatar of the tweeter, the text of the post, the date the tweet was posted, the post ID, images, whether the post is a quote or a retweet, the number of retweets and likes, and the URL link to the post. This dataset was then analyzed using R Studio 2022.07.1, Tableau Desktop 2022.4, and Microsoft Excel. To ensure that the data analyzed were relevant to the research and the users were active and had recent interactions, data was limited to users who were active during the period of January 2018 to September 2023. The data yielded insights on the various users who engaged in discussions on the platform using the hashtag #Fibershed, their Twitter activity over the years, the number of tweets, and the number of likes and retweets of these tweets. Activities such as posting rate, likes, retweets, and engagement are factors that help determine how users are able influence others to engage and drive action, particularly on social media (Arora et al., 2019). Therefore, an in-depth examination of the top twenty users based on the number of tweets that had at least 1 like associated with it were analyzed to provide insights on the individuals and groups who are involved in the online community of Fibershed. Based on prior research of the Fibershed organization and examination of the Twitter handles and individual tweets, these users were categorized into different stakeholder groups.

Analysis of the data revealed a diverse range of contributors and participants. To ensure privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were used for usernames. The first major stakeholder group identified was the Fibershed Organization and its affiliated Fibersheds, @fs and @nfs, which acted as the central entity by promoting sustainable practices, connecting various stakeholders, and disseminating important information. The next group of stakeholders embodied

various roles within the Fibershed S2S Framework, with users like @gl, @ls, @le, @nyf representing farmers and ranchers; users like @sw and @twd representing the processing stage of textile production like shearing and dyeing; users like @sb and @sw representing artists, knitters, and designers; and users like @le producing garments and accessories and representing manufacturers. The next group of stakeholders identified were individual experts, authors and writers, with users like @tt, @jt, and @js contributing expertise and insights, and amplifying the discussion on sustainable fashion practices. The fourth stakeholder category was comprised of sustainability focused organizations such as @rn, @tgo, @cca, @ gbg, @hrec, @kf_, and @sc, that were aligned with Fibershed's objectives and collaborated with and advocated for sustainable initiatives. Finally, individual contributors like @wms brought individual perspectives, fostering a more personal engagement with Fibershed and sustainable practices.

Each stakeholder category represents a unique perspective and role in the Fibershed ecosystem. Their collective engagement shapes the overall discourse, fostering collaboration, knowledge exchange, and innovation towards sustainable and ethical practices in the fashion industry. While Fibershed extends beyond online activities, this netnographic approach was instrumental in developing an understanding of the different stakeholder categories, which helped in identifying the key groups involved in the Fibershed S2S process, and in turn, helped to identify the scope of participants necessary to include in the in-depth interviews.

Based on the insights gained from the netnographic observation, the various roles played by different stakeholders within the Fibershed S2S Framework were further explored through in-depth interviews, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and contributions. Based on the different roles identified in the netnographic observation, interviews were conducted with representatives from the Fibershed Organization and its affiliated

Fibersheds, farmers, ranchers, textile processors, artists, designers, and manufacturers. This approach allowed for a holistic exploration of sustainable practices in the apparel industry and within Fibershed, capturing insights from diverse stakeholders and facilitating an in-depth understanding of their contributions and challenges within the Fibershed S2S Framework. Additionally, by engaging with representatives from each stakeholder category, the interviews facilitated a deeper exploration of the types of interactions and collaborations that occur within the Fibershed community.

In-Depth Interviews

Following the netnographic observation, in-depth interviews were used to acquire a more detailed understanding of Fibershed. This approach is appropriate when the research is aimed at gathering greater insight into and understanding about a phenomenon (McCracken, 1988; Merriam, 1998). Likewise, in-depth interviews are useful when the goal is to comprehend the essence of a phenomenon and understand an individual's experiences with it (McCracken, 1988). Because the aim of the in-depth interview method is to understand the topic from the viewpoint of participants who go through a particular experience, the sample was comprised of individuals associated with Fibershed in some capacity. According to Blair et al. (2013), the response rate for face-to-face interviews is high since it is difficult to refuse to respond to the researcher when asked a question directly. Moreover, face-to-face interviews encounter lower response biases because respondents usually tend to be more honest when asked questions directly by the interviewer. Using interviews as guided conversations, direct interaction between the researcher and participant is possible, giving the researcher the ability to guide the conversation to specific topics of interest and address broad questions on a particular theme (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Additionally, gathering information through interviews is one of the most common, convenient, flexible, and inexpensive means of collecting qualitative data (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

A total of thirteen virtual interviews were conducted. Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual interviews have become common and face-to-face interviews over video applications like Zoom or Skype have become standard practices. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A), the virtual interviews were scheduled with participants via email. The email also included a consent form outlining the research protocol and the researchers' contact details. Before the beginning of the interview, confirmation was obtained from the participants that they read the consent form, understood it, and agreed to it.

There are three main types of interviews conducted in qualitative research: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. In *structured or standardized interviews*, the wording and order of questions are predetermined and there is no flexibility for participants to freely share their perspectives and views. This approach is considered an oral form of survey and is often used to gather respondents' socio-demographic data (Lune & Berg, 2017; Merriam, 1998). In a *semi-structured interview*, questions are less structured and more open-ended, allowing participants to explain more about what they feel is important (Merriam, 1998). There is flexibility in the way questions are administered to the participants based on the flow of conversation, the level of language can be adjusted, probes can be made between subsequent subjects to elicit more pertinent information, participants can be given clarification about the research, and their questions can be answered in the moment (Lune & Berg, 2017). In *unstructured interviews*, even though the topics are planned, they are loosely structured, with conversation flows depending on participant responses. The participant leads the conversation and interview guidelines are used only to ensure the goals for the interview have been met. This

approach is usually adopted when a phenomenon is relatively unknown to the researcher and the interview is exploratory (Merriam, 1998). The *semi-structured* interview was used in this study. The ability to administer questions in a flexible manner and allow participants to freely share their perspectives or views while maintaining some structure during the interview process was the main reason the semi-structured interview format was adopted for exploring the topics related to Fibershed.

To ensure consistency and a systematic approach to data collection, interview questions were semi-structured and followed a pre-set interview schedule (see Appendix B). The questions were broadly segmented into two parts – the first part began with grand tour questions (McCracken, 1988), and then moved to questions that focused on the participants’ general views on sustainability and sustainable fashion. The second part addressed questions that delved deeper into the participants’ experiences with and perspectives on Fibershed.

According to McCracken (1988), the opening of the interview should demonstrate the interviewer as a benign, accepting, and curious individual, and put the interviewee at ease by asking simple and informational questions. Grand tour questions are non-directive and general questions that open the interview and cue the interviewer to the participant's biographical realities that will inform the subsequent responses. This part of the interview is designed to establish rapport and build trust between the interviewer and the interviewee (McCracken 1988). After setting the tone, the participants were asked to share their views on sustainable fashion, the different factors that impact the successful adoption of sustainable fashion among consumers, and the role of government policies and legislation on sustainable production and consumption. Questions included “*How do you define ‘sustainable fashion?’*” and “*Why do you think sustainable fashion is important?*” The interviewees were also asked about their level of

familiarity with different concepts related to sustainability. Questions then proceeded to their perspectives on and experiences with the Fibershed organization and the Fibershed Soil to Soil Framework. After initial questions on how they became associated with Fibershed, questions progressed to become more detailed about their thoughts and perceptions of how Fibershed contributes to sustainable fashion. Questions included *“What differentiates Fibershed as an organization that is focused on sustainable fashion compared to other sustainability initiatives? Why?”* and *“Is there a role for the retailer in the Fibershed process? Do you think there is a place for the retailer in the traditional sense, as a middle person between the manufacturer and consumer? If yes why, if not why?”* When necessary, prompts and follow-up questions were used to probe for more information and gain a more in-depth understanding of the participant’s particular views.

The virtual interviews lasted between 60 to 75 minutes on average and were either audio or videotaped based on the participant’s permission. According to Rubin and Rubin (1995), recording interviews preserves the material in an accurate and retrievable form, and also gives the respondents a positive impression that their responses are being captured accurately. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded and analyzed for themes. Participants were sent copies of their transcripts to review and asked to confirm the contents as a form of member check. Member checks are used to increase the trustworthiness of the data and ensure the overall credibility of the interpretation (Hodges, 2011).

The technique of purposive sampling was used for the identification and recruitment of participants. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research when the research aims to explore, discover, and gain an understanding of a specific phenomenon (Palinkas et al., 2015). Moreover, purposive sampling helps identify participants who can offer an in-depth

understanding of the topic at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As discussed previously in this chapter, findings of the netnographic observation helped identify the key stakeholder groups involved in Fibershed, which informed the approach to participant recruitment. That is, individuals involved with Fibershed in regions across the United States and representing the key stakeholder groups identified in the netnographic observation were recruited to participate in the interviews.

A total of 18 participants who had different roles and were affiliated with different regional Fibersheds were contacted via email. Participants were contacted through the Fibershed Affiliate Directory (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Fibershed Affiliate Directory, n.d.). The Fibershed Affiliate Directory is a registry of Fibershed Network groups worldwide that share the common goal of supporting the regional fiber systems (Fibershed Affiliate Directory, n.d.). Found on the Fibershed website, this directory is an online listing of affiliates currently operational within the Fibershed network. The directory includes information about the location of the Fibershed, the contact details, the website and social media handles of the affiliate, and a brief description of that particular Fibershed location. Those participants who agreed to volunteer were asked to refer others who fit the criteria and would be interested in the study.

As seen in Table 3, a total of 13 participants took part in the interview process. All participants were over the age of 18 and were associated with different Fibersheds across the United States. The participants in the interview process represented a diverse array of stakeholder roles within the Fibershed ecosystem and were initially identified through netnographic observations. These roles encompassed various stakeholder groups such as the representatives of different Fibershed Organizations across the US, farmers, artists, dyers, designers, and apparel makers, each contributing uniquely to the advancement of sustainable

practices in the apparel and textile industry. As indicated in Table 3, each participant is identified by the stakeholder group that was defined during the netnographic observation. In order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, each was assigned a set of pseudonym initials (see Table 3).

Table 3. Interview Participant Profile

Participant	Fibershed Region (USA)	Role	Stakeholder Group
IQ	West Coast	Coordinator	Fibershed Organization
SC	West Coast	Director	Fibershed Organization
IU	Northeast	Researcher	Individual Experts
MZ	East Coast	Farmer	Farmers and Ranchers
LX	East Coast	Artist	Artists and Designers
DM	East Coast	Designer	Artists and Designers
TE	South Central	Coordinator	Fibershed Organization
MS	West Coast	Coordinator	Fibershed Organization
MT	Northeast	Designer	Artists and Designers
PA	East Coast	Retailer/Manufacturer	Processor: Manufacturer
HX	East Coast	Manufacturer	Processor: Manufacturer
UX	East Coast	Natural Dye Artist	Processor: Dyer
LCP	East Coast	Crafter	Artists and Designers

Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached and no new information was revealed during the interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Hodges, 2011). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then coded and iteratively analyzed for themes (Hodges, 2011; Spiggle, 1994). Verbatim transcriptions were both open and axial coded. Coding is a process that involves the systematic analysis and categorization of data to identify patterns, themes, and relationships (Spiggle, 1994). The initial stage involved breaking down the transcripts, analyzing them to identify main ideas or concepts across them, coding them, and categorizing them into themes or categories (Spiggle, 1994). This was followed by axial coding to refine the initial coding and

ultimately identify emergent themes, as well as to achieve internal consistency within the process of analysis and interpretation. This step involved a more focused and systematic examination of the data to identify relationships between themes, sub-themes, categories, and subcategories identified during the open coding phase (Spiggle, 1994). The process of moving back and forth between the particular to the general and back again continued until distinctive emergent themes were gleaned from the data. Analysis began with a line-by-line review of each transcription and then proceeded toward more general observations within each interview and across all interviews (Kvale, 1996).

Thematic Interpretation

The thematic interpretation of the participants' responses revolved around sustainability in fashion, emphasizing a holistic and ethical approach alongside regional autonomy. The analysis of in-depth interviews revealed four main themes: *Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings*, *Community-Centric Sustainability*, *Consumer Awareness*, and *Selling Sustainability*. Each is briefly discussed next.

Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings

The theme *One Concept, Many Meanings* was a common idea surfacing in the interviews and reflected the participants' perceptions about sustainability. For the majority of the participants, sustainability encompassed actions benefiting the planet, people, and profit, both separately as well as simultaneously. As UX stated:

It used to be that Venn diagram that was people, profit, and planet... planet, people, and then profit is the smallest part of it, so, it's more like one of those Russian dolls where, like planet is the biggest part of the Venn diagram; that is sustainable fashion.

Participants noted a shift towards a prioritization of sustainable strategies to some degree, specifically those aiming to minimize carbon footprints, promote equitable labor practices, and efficiently utilize resources throughout production processes. As UX further clarified:

To me, that means that every step of the process, including retail, is planet-focused so that the carbon footprint of a manufacturer is smaller, you know, the factories are working in a sustainable way that includes labor equity, the manufacture of the clothing is equitable, resources are available to the people who are working; you know all of those things that go into the process of, like, making one shirt.

When talking about sustainability, participants underscored the importance of ethical considerations in production, emphasizing, "Ethical working conditions for people who are producing our clothing and in every stage of the supply chain, ... not creating a lot of pollution or not destroying the earth... not ruining our soils... not producing lots of fossil fuels" (LX). Participants also highlighted concerns about overproduction and its long-term consequences and advocated for rethinking current supply chain structures. As SC stated: "We're already producing, you know, we're already producing more than we need, we're definitely in a state of overproduction and so I think that's why it's hard."

Second, participants commented on the need for development of a farm-forward approach, that is, "sourcing fiber directly from the farmers and ranchers in the ecosystems, understanding from them what their production system is, and how they're trying to shift it in positive ways, really having that relationship as the basis of their supply chain" (IQ). There was a strong inclination towards regional collaboration and localization in manufacturing, as per MT: "We're working within a specific buyer region. We're trying to get everything manufactured [regionally]." The emphasis extended beyond mere sustainability to focus on cradle-to-cradle

ideation and a systems thinking approach that encompassed the entire product lifecycle. Systems thinking involves the understanding of entire production systems, and seeing the interconnections between different parts therein. Particularly, the focus was on the longevity of the products, followed by treatment at the end of product life, as well as the well-being of the individuals involved in the process. As MZ put it:

It involves both the production of the fiber initially, the processing of that fiber, the treatment of the people involved in those jobs, and the disposal of whatever waste and disposal of the end product when it's not of use anymore. That there should be a circle of good treatment of everything.

To many participants, this required moving away from linear consumption models to a circular model that maximizes resource efficiency throughout the production process. As MT commented: "It's about moving this linear model of extraction, consumption, and waste, moving that into a circular model."

Alongside an emphasis on circular systems, participants also highlighted the aim of producing apparel products that benefit local communities, fostering economic growth and improved community health while ensuring a sustainable cycle within bioregional ecosystems. Indeed, the focus on local emerged as crucial, emphasizing the value of local production beyond sustainability alone. Participants focused on topographical demarcations and the promotion of localism. As MZ stated, "I guess the localness...yeah., because you know, I can buy something from somebody in California, and it could be sustainable. But it's not local to me." Participants like LX appreciated the autonomy provided by local practices, "We're just totally on our own doing our own thing, so that has some positive aspects, like we can be focused on our own locality, we can do it however we want, however it feels best in our area."

Participant responses revealed the various meanings that sustainability holds for them, including actions benefitting people, profit, and the planet. Overall, participant responses shed light on the ways that the Fibershed community reflects a collective commitment to sustainability that intertwines environmental consciousness, ethical production, regional autonomy, and a circular economy approach, shaping a holistic perspective towards sustainable fashion.

Community-Centric Sustainability

In reflecting on Fibershed's vision of sustainability, participants accentuated the role of the organization in advocating for sustainable practices that foster community involvement and collaboration among network members. For example, MT emphasized the establishment of networks within bio regions, stating, "Working with building networks... like, you know, like textile, including manufacturing ecosystems." IQ elaborated on Fibershed's role in helping members, describing the organization's producer program that facilitates access to resources and opportunities: "We have a membership program for farmers, ranchers, artisans, manufacturers, and retailers... in person meetings, and networking and sales opportunities that we are creating and then advertising to the public." MZ highlighted the need for diverse expertise among members by pointing out that, "The working group... needs to expand with expertise in all those different things."

Recognizing the integral role retailing plays in the marketplace, one way that Fibershed prompts community building is by creating opportunities for stakeholders to find a market for their products. Participants underscored Fibershed's encouragement of cooperative marketing, where collaborative efforts were made toward the production and distribution of sustainable products. As HP explained:

Collective marketing has been something a lot of our producers have expressed a need for ...Fibershed as a nonprofit advertising the marketplace and attracting the public to come and creating those opportunities for people to have sales, you know, kind of like a farmer's market model.

MT elaborated on this by saying, "Retail should be thought of in a cooperative way... cooperative marketing of the product."

TE highlighted the significance of relationship-building, saying, "Developing relationships... is one of the basic tenants of growing this project... developing relationships with our farmers, with people who are just interested." Additionally, Fibershed plays an important role in developing and supporting the community through information and education.

Participants emphasized Fibershed's educational role in facilitating the exchange of information and sharing expertise, with LC mentioning, "The groups like Fibershed can ... just open conversations about what sustainability really is." As TE emphasized, "Education. I think it's all about education... we try to do educational programming wherever we go." DM highlighted the economic and resilience dimensions of local development, especially crucial in unprecedented times like the COVID era, saying: "it's local economic development... local businesses keep more dollars in the community... it creates more resilience, like resource resilience."

The participants also noted Fibershed's commitment to social equity and justice. For example, SC highlighted inclusivity, affirming, "You're probably gonna hear from the person knitting and the cut and sew. They're all part of the story, they have a voice... there's a certain safety in that." SC also emphasized Fibershed's trust-building through transparency related to sustainability and social justice, noting, "A system that's transparent... we're creating prosperity along the value chain, because we are making sure everyone got what they needed... not anyone

taking more of the value of something than is deserved." For participants, Fibershed highlights the farming community's role in cultivating shared values, reinforcing the idea of community-driven standards and beliefs woven into the sustainability narrative. As LCP commented: "You know...I think, that is also like [the] farming community to help us create our own, to create sets of values around it."

Participant responses revealed Fibershed's multi-faceted role in advocating sustainability through emphasizing collaborative approaches, community building, education, and equitable practices. The organization's emphasis on fostering network relationships, promoting transparency, and ensuring equity positions Fibershed as a facilitator for sustainable community-centric initiatives.

Consumer Awareness and Engagement

The perspectives shared by the participants underscored critical themes of consumer awareness and action within the context of sustainable fashion. Consumer awareness, or lack thereof, regarding issues related to the impact of apparel production and consumption surfaced as a recurrent and significant concern, with various dimensions impacting consumers' understanding and actions.

Participants highlighted a lack of consumer awareness regarding production, and particularly the impact of the manufacturing phase, as well as the resultant effect it has on the environment. As MZ explained: "People don't know very much about the process, about what's involved in production, you know, I think particularly of dyes. People don't know much about the impact of the color of their clothing." Participants expressed concerns about the extensive amount of waste resulting from overproduction and rapid disposal, driven by consumers'

purchasing habits and think it shows a lack of comprehension regarding the fashion industry's environmental impact. As SC explained:

So, not only do you have unsold inventory, but you have a rapid pace of purchase and disposal... you develop an understanding of how much inventory is not getting sold, where they are ending up, or the pace at which people are purchasing and then throwing away.

Moreover, participants pointed out the industry's role in misguiding consumers through greenwashing tactics, as highlighted by IQ: "Most people are trying to make the best choices that they have ...but so often they're given the message that things are sustainable or a good positive choice when they aren't necessarily an improvement over something else."

When it comes to acting on sustainable initiatives, participants pointed out that consumers influence how the fashion industry operates. Specifically, many expressed concern regarding their disposable mindset and its contribution to excessive waste generation. For example, HX highlighted society's shift towards disposability and the urgent need to address product end-of-life: "We've become a society of people who think everything is disposable and if we don't start thinking about end-of-life issues with everything we purchase, it's just gonna keep getting worse and worse and worse." Participants acknowledged the challenges that come with trying to change consumers overnight, therefore they emphasized incremental change. As DM explained: "It's not reasonable to expect someone to just, like, overnight change exactly what they're doing, but it's like, can you make one change...can you buy like half as many clothes this year?"

The interview data highlighted the extent to which participants see an intention-behavior gap, that is, the disconnect between consumers' stated values and their actual consumption behaviors, attributed in part to the opacity of the fashion industry, greenwashing, and cost

concerns. As DM pointed out, it is not in the interest of fast fashion retailers to be transparent to their consumers: “I think, that there's a reason people don't think about how their clothing is made, and where it comes from, because when you do, it's not very good for the people who are making money off of clothing right now.” Likewise, SC pointed out: “86% of Gen. Z's first value when looking for clothing is the price point, the lowest price point. But yet they're on TikTok screaming about climate change.” Some participants were also concerned about the lack of style and fashion in sustainable garments and felt that is also a part of the reason for consumers' reluctance to embrace sustainable alternatives. As MS commented:

They use local cotton or local wool, and then they want people to buy it because it's sustainable and it's ugly...it has no style and I think I don't want to walk outside in a like baby puke, colored formless ... sweatshirt, pajamas set just so that I can say, ‘Hey, I'm sustainable,’ like, there's no reason for design not to be part of the equation.

At the same time, IU thinks there have been positive shifts in consumer behavior post-pandemic and there is a move towards more thoughtful consumption, including a preference for second-hand clothing, hinting at changing attitudes: “I guess the pandemic has shifted some of the consumer behaviors to, it seems consume less, and then think about the quality... consider the value of second-hand clothing to help reduce ... the waste.”

Despite these challenges, participants recognized consumers' potential as catalysts for change in the fashion industry. One participant, MT compared the emerging awareness in fashion to the local food movement, indicating a growing collective consciousness among consumers regarding the impact of their fashion choices.

I think just like the ... local food movement ... made people aware of ... how their food's grown and processed, ... there's ... a collective embodiment that's emerging ... an understanding that our consumer choices make a difference around clothing and textiles.

Moreover, several participants suggested ways that consumers could influence manufacturers and retailers to produce and promote sustainable products. Indeed, TE highlighted the importance of consumer feedback to retailers, especially in advocating for transparent labeling and ethical sourcing in products:

I have several shops in LA that I like to go to. They are small, single owner places. And I always talk to them about, you know, if you just had a little label on here, and if you're buying or you're out there doing your seasonal buying, you know, let them know that your customers are wanting 100% cotton, 100% wool. We want to know who grew it, we want to know where it was manufactured, under what circumstances and so on.

The collective sentiment among the participants was that consumers play a pivotal role in effecting change, from demanding sustainable practices to driving industry shifts toward sustainable production through informed choices and active engagement. This perspective suggests that retailers can play a similarly critical role in making the industry more sustainable.

Selling Sustainability

In the interviews with participants, the local retailer emerged as a key player in fostering sustainable fashion consumption. Specifically, participants think that local retailers can play an important role in building sustainability awareness in at least three ways: (1) as educator, (2) as trendsetter, and (3) as facilitator. All three emphasize the multifaceted role of local retailers in potentially promoting and disseminating sustainable fashion.

First, participants acknowledged that local retailers could educate and enlighten consumers about sustainable fashion. They emphasized the potential for local boutique retailers, in particular, to educate consumers on natural fibers and material provenance, and, in general, the uniqueness and authenticity of sustainably-made garments. For instance, IQ highlighted the retailer's commitment to educating consumers about the materials used in their products: “[Company name] is an example of a retailer whose underlying ethic is very much about educating their consumers on natural fibers and the providence of the materials that their products all are made out of.” Likewise, MT emphasized the significance of retailers for raising awareness about the unique qualities of sustainable fashion items, and thereby fostering greater consumer awareness of the uniqueness of the end product, such as: “...why there are these idiosyncrasies ... qualities around the fiber, like every yarn and why the shade change...into raising awareness about the special nature of it, you know, like every yarn, it's different.”

Second, participants talked about how local retailers have the power to influence consumers' choices as well as perceptions about what they should purchase. Setting trends, retailers curate fashion items available to consumers. TE's testimony illustrates the lasting impact of the suggestions of one retailer that she patronizes on her wardrobe: “Every piece that she ever suggested ... she said, this (you) will have in your wardrobe, I guarantee it, for the next 20 years; well, I want to tell you, it's still sitting in there.” Similarly, participants shared that local retailers could provide consumers with personalized service, answer their questions about sustainability, and guide them toward sustainable choices.

Finally, in viewing the retailer as a facilitator, participants underscored the ways that the local retailer can promote sustainable fashion. They emphasized the retailer's ability to utilize marketing platforms effectively to advocate for the benefits of sustainable fashion and make such

products accessible to consumers at reasonable prices. To that end, SC thinks a simple and straightforward approach would be most effective:

I could see this, a retail outlet, that reminds me a lot of how I've seen people create food accessibility with food hubs... like here, everything's coming in a cardboard box. We're not steaming the clothing and putting it on models...this whole thing is gonna feel really simple and bootstrapped, and the whole value of it is that it's not catering to your sense of like how these clothes make you a better person in this way. This isn't about us selling you an image. This is about us getting you an essential good. It keeps you warm, healthy, and happy.

Likewise, several participants talked about cooperative marketing models, whereby small artisan groups and local retailers collaborate to create platforms that offer sustainable products that customers can trust. MT envisioned a cooperative marketplace, fostering trust and proximity between producers and consumers, resembling a farmers' market setting: "I think retail should be thought of in a cooperative way ... the marketplace should be like ... the post feudal... marketplace, where we had a versioning of, you know, all sorts of economic activity."

There was clearly a consensus among participants regarding the influential role local retailers can play in shaping consumer perceptions by disseminating sustainability knowledge, setting sustainable apparel trends, and marketing sustainable fashion, thereby contributing significantly to a culture of sustainability among apparel consumers.

The thematic interpretation of interview data highlighted key ways that participants, as stakeholders within Fibershed, advocate for sustainable consumption and endorse the patronage of local retailers that could sell sustainable products. The first theme, *Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings* highlighted Fibershed's overall vision of sustainability. Participants

underscored the importance of Fibershed's approach in guiding individuals and businesses toward embracing sustainable practices. Participants emphasized the significance of a farm-forward approach, creating prosperity chains within local ecosystems, and the need for localized supply chains. In the second theme, *Community-Centric Sustainability*, participants emphasized community attachment through local economic development, partnerships, and networks. They highlighted the need for local connections, specifying how localization fosters relationships between stakeholders, as well as resilience in difficult times. In the third theme, *Consumer Awareness and Engagement*, participants expressed concern about consumers' lack of awareness regarding fashion's environmental impact and the desire for overconsumption, emphasizing issues such as textile waste, greenwashing, and inadequate access to trustworthy sources of information. They highlighted the need for education and behavioral changes among consumers, and shared ideas about how to facilitate more conscious choices among them. Participants recognized the potential for consumers to affect change by being aware of their impact in influencing manufacturers and retailers. However, such change requires closing the intention-behavior gap, pointing to the need for information and education. In the final theme *Selling Sustainability*, the crucial role of local retailers in helping consumers close the gap emerged. That is, participants viewed local retailers as potential educators, trendsetters, and facilitators and emphasized retailers' educational role in communicating the uniqueness of sustainable products, ability to set and influence trends, and to facilitate sales and marketing efforts to reach consumers.

The data collected in Phase I pointed to the holistic approach to sustainable production and consumption envisioned by Fibershed. Issues of community attachment, consumer awareness and behavioral change, and the key role of local retailers in educating, shaping trends,

and marketing with regard to sustainable fashion were uncovered. According to participants, there was a strong need for local retailers to be part of the S2S Framework, and especially because they can shape consumer perceptions and expectations surrounding sustainable apparel.

Phase II: Main Study

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the objective of Phase II is to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. A quantitative research approach was deemed appropriate to address this objective. According to Guba (1990), in the quantitative research approach, hypotheses or questions are developed prior to analysis in the form of propositions and subjected to empirical tests under conditions that are carefully controlled. Quantitative research methods focus on numerical data and variables that can be measured and used to explain relationships (Park & Park, 2016). In particular, the survey method is often used to capture characteristics of a large group, and draw conclusions about attitudes, opinions, or status based on the sample of a population (Park & Park, 2016).

The adoption of a quantitative research approach in this dissertation enables the study to systematically investigate and empirically test the relationships among different factors that influence consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. This approach ensures methodological rigor, objectivity, and generalizability of findings, thereby enhancing the study's contribution to understanding the role of retail within the Fibershed S2S Framework.

Instrument Development

The findings from Phase I study as well as the literature review helped identify the factors that influence consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Based on the findings of Phase I, which involved the thematic analysis and

interpretation of in-depth interviews with Fibershed members, alongside the constructs identified in the review of literature discussed in Chapter II, a structured questionnaire containing relevant variables was developed to investigate consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

The questionnaire was comprised of seven sections: (1) community attachment, (2) need for uniqueness, (3) consumers' awareness of the environmental impact of textile and apparel production, (4) consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production, (5) local retailers' commitment to sustainability and (6) authenticity, and finally, (7) consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (see Appendix C for the questionnaire). A five-point Likert-type scale was used to measure all constructs. The scale measured the participant's degree of agreement with each statement, ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5) for all items used in the scale. A number of attention checks and demographic items were also included. The following outlines each section of the questionnaire.

Community Attachment

The findings from the in-depth interviews with the Fibershed participants underscored the integral role of community attachment and collaboration within the Fibershed network. As members of the network, participants highlighted the significance of shared values, interconnections, and collaborative efforts in fostering a sense of belonging and driving collective action towards sustainable practices within the community. In line with the findings, Landry et al. (2005) define community as a group of individuals whose relationships are interlinked with each other based on shared interests and patterns of behavior that are recognizable within a common locality. In this study, community attachment is conceptualized as

a human value encompassing various emotions, such as loyalty, identification, and a feeling of belonging within a community that significantly shapes the behaviors and decision-making processes of residents concerning consumption (Miller, 2001). To assess consumers' community attachment, seven items reporting acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.72$) by Miller (2001) were modified to measure this construct.

Need for Uniqueness

Insights from the Phase I interviews highlighted participants' acknowledgment of retailers' crucial role in educating consumers about the uniqueness and authenticity of sustainable garments, including conveying information about the idiosyncrasies of natural fibers and material provenance, especially appealing to those consumers that value individuality and uniqueness in their apparel. As discussed in Chapter II, the consumer's need for uniqueness is an individual's desire to be distinct from others in terms of the possession and display of material objects (Seo & Lang, 2019). In line with the views of participants in the qualitative interviews, uniqueness in apparel products is often achieved when they are manufactured using slow fashion processes (Jung & Jin, 2014). Six items extracted from Tian et al. (2001) were used to evaluate need for uniqueness. These items were chosen from the Creative Choice Counterconformity dimension of need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001) because they reflect an individual's inclination toward distinctive and unconventional products or brands and highlight the desire to create a personal style that stands out and communicates individuality. Tian et al. (2001) reported acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.81$).

Environmental Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production

During the in-depth interviews in Phase I, participants highlighted a recurring concern regarding consumer awareness, or lack thereof, regarding issues related to apparel production

and consumption. Specifically, participants emphasized consumers' limited understanding of the harmful effects of manufacturing, overproduction, and overconsumption, as well as a general lack of awareness regarding the environmental impact of the apparel and textile industry. As discussed in Chapter II, environmental awareness is a reflection of the consumer's understanding of the environmental impact of textile and apparel production (Connell & Kozar, 2014). To measure this construct, four items related to knowledge of environmental issues in the apparel industry with acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.78$) were adapted from Diddi and Niehm (2016).

Social Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production

Findings from Phase I highlighted Fibershed's commitment to social equity and justice, where the rights and wellbeing of workers involved in local production are protected. Participants also highlighted Fibershed's efforts in building trust through transparency, acknowledging it as markedly different from the detrimental practices followed by manufacturers of fast fashion in developing countries. Consumers' awareness of social and ethical issues influences their shopping behaviors and their attitudes towards those retailers that they perceive as contributing to sustainability (Sanchez-Gonzales et al., 2020). Consumers' understanding of socially responsible business practices within the apparel supply chain helps them to engage in responsible actions, thereby benefitting society as a whole (Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009). To measure this construct, four items with acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.83$) related to knowledge of social issues in the apparel industry were adapted from Diddi and Niehm (2016).

Consumers' Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability and Authenticity

According to Dixit et al. (2020), consumer perception pertains to the thoughts and opinions that a consumer holds regarding a brand, product, or organization. Perception encompasses the consumer's awareness, understanding, or overall view of a product shaped by factors such as past experiences, beliefs, habits, preferences, and emotions, as well as an organization's marketing and advertising messages. Based on the findings from the qualitative interviews, it was evident that participants thought local retailers could influence consumers by engaging and communicating with them about the sustainability of apparel products. Moreover, according to Mauri et al. (2022), consumers' expectations that retailers engage in sustainable practices has led to more sustainable product offerings as well as strengthened consumer-retailer relationships. For the purpose of this dissertation, consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability is conceptualized as the consumer's views of the retailer based on its sustainability efforts. The significance of consumer perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability has been established by studies examining whether consumers are willing to pay higher prices and patronize retailers that they perceive are sustainable and align with their values (Kim et al., 2015; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). To measure consumers' perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability, seven items reporting acceptable reliability (Cronbach's alpha \geq 0.89) were adapted from Dabija and Băbuț (2019).

According to Jung (2014), products crafted by highly skilled artisans using traditional methods, such as original looms and traditional construction techniques, are perceived as authentic by consumers. This perception extends to their view of the retailers selling the products and influences their loyalty behavior (Cuesta-Valino et al., 2022). The conceptualization of consumers' perception of local retailers' authenticity is reflected by 7 items adapted from the

study by Cuesta-Valino et al. (2022), who reported acceptable reliability (Cronbach alpha \geq 0.88).

Consumers' Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

Based on the insights of the qualitative interviews in Phase I, participants regarded retailers as key stakeholders in the promotion of sustainable fashion and apparel. Participants emphasized the retailer's role in raising consumers' awareness about sustainability through different means, and were unanimous in the view that local retailers can shape consumer perceptions of sustainability through education, setting trends, marketing sustainable products, and supporting a culture of sustainability. A local retailer's capability to assess and adapt to customers' needs not only gives it a competitive edge, but also fosters greater consumer loyalty (Miller, 2001). For the purpose of this dissertation, consumers' intentions to patronize a retailer is conceptualized as their willingness to support a retailer by purchasing from it and recommending it to others. Five items from Peterson et al. (2021) were used to measure consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Peterson et al. (2021) reported sufficient reliability, with Cronbach alpha \geq 0.70 for the construct.

Table 4 provides a summary of each construct, including its conceptualization, the specific items used to measure the construct in the questionnaire, and item source.

Table 4. Sources of Scales

Construct	Conceptualization	Items	Source
Community attachment (CA)	Feeling of belonging within a community.	CA1: I am involved in my community activities. CA2: I am interested in knowing what goes on in my community. CA3: I feel that I fit well into my community. CA4: I have a lot in common with most of the people in my community. CA5: I am satisfied that this is the best possible place I could live in. CA6: I would be very sorry if I had to move away from this community. CA7: I feel at home in this community.	Miller (2001)
Need for uniqueness (NU)	An individual's desire to be distinct from others in terms of material possessions.	NU1: I am often on the lookout for one-of-a-kind products or brands, so that I can create a style that is all my own. NU2: Often when buying apparel, an important goal is to find something that communicates my uniqueness. NU3: I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original. NU4: I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands. NU5: Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image. NU6: I am often on the lookout for new products and brands that will add to my personal uniqueness.	Tian et al. (2001)
Consumers' awareness of environmental impacts (EI)	Consumers' level of awareness related to the environmental impact of textile and apparel production.	EI1: Chemical pollutants are produced during manufacturing of synthetic or manufactured fibers such as polyester. EI2: Air pollution can occur during some common dye processes of textiles. EI3: Textile dyeing and finishing processes use a lot of water.	Diddi and Niehm (2016)

Consumers' awareness of social impacts (SI)	Consumers' level of awareness related to the social impacts of textile and apparel production.	<p>EI4: Phosphate-containing laundry detergents can be a source of water pollution.</p> <p>SI1: Use of child labor is a practice among apparel manufacturers.</p> <p>SI2: Apparel manufacturers generally do not pay their employees at least the local minimum wage.</p> <p>SI3 Apparel manufacturers generally have their employees work more than 40 hours per week.</p> <p>SI4: Apparel manufacturers generally provide hazardous workplaces for their employees.</p>	Diddi and Niehm (2016)
Consumer perception of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (CS)	Consumers' views of local retailers' sustainability efforts.	<p>CS1: Local retailers are responsible towards the environment.</p> <p>CS2: Local retailers support worthy causes.</p> <p>CS3: Local retailers are concerned with improving society welfare.</p> <p>CS4: Local retailers keep up high ethical standards.</p> <p>CS5: Local retailers are socially responsible.</p> <p>CS6: Local retailers protect employees.</p> <p>CS7: Local retailers make sustained efforts to create new jobs.</p>	Dabija and Băbuț (2019)
Consumer perception of local retailers' authenticity (PA)	Consumers' impression of local retailers' commitment to heritage and originality.	<p>PA1: Local retailers are stores with a tradition.</p> <p>PA2: The promise of local retailers is closely linked to their traditions.</p> <p>PA3: Local retailers are conscious of their traditions.</p> <p>PA4: Local retail stores are different from all other stores.</p> <p>PA5: Local retail stores stand out from all other stores.</p> <p>PA6: I think local retail stores are unique.</p> <p>PA7: I think local retail stores clearly distinguish themselves from other stores.</p>	Cuesta – Valino et al. (2022)
Intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed	Consumers' willingness to buy from, support and recommend local retailers selling	IP1: I will only purchase from local retailers that are committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products.	Peterson et al. (2021)

affiliated products (IP)	Fibershed affiliated products.	<p>IP2: People have an obligation to support local retailers that are committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products.</p> <p>IP3: I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products.</p> <p>IP4: I would be more likely to recommend a local retailer to others if it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products.</p> <p>IP5: I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was more committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products than another competing retailer.</p>
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Demographic Information

Demographic information was collected from respondents in terms of (1) gender, (2) age, (3) ethnicity, (4) state of residence, (5) education level, (6) marital status, and (7) annual household income before taxes, (8) community characteristics, and (9) political orientation.

Instrument Pretest

Prior to final survey distribution, a pretest was conducted. First, the survey was distributed to graduate students and faculty sustainability experts. Participants were tasked with assessing the questionnaire's clarity, encompassing aspects such as wording, question content, sequence, format, layout, comprehension difficulty, and instructions. Modifications to the questionnaire were made in response to participants' feedback. Both the pretest and the final questionnaire began with a cover page that describes the purpose of the research and contained a brief definition of the term “Fibershed,” “local retailer,” and “Fibershed affiliated sustainable products.” Two screening question were used, the first regarding consent to participate in the survey, and the second regarding age (i.e., age 18 or older). The main questionnaire was comprised of seven sections: (1) community attachment, (2) need for uniqueness, (3) awareness

of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production, (4) awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production, (5) consumers' perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, (6) intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, and (7) demographic information (see Appendix C for questionnaire). Except for the demographic information, participants indicated their agreement with all statements on a 5-point Likert scale as follows: 1-*strongly disagree*, 2-*disagree*, 3-*neither agree nor disagree*, 4-*agree*, and 5-*strongly agree*.

Once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained (see Appendix D), the survey was created in Qualtrics and posted on the Prolific research platform. During the data collection process, a condition was set on the Prolific platform such that respondents that did not answer the attention check questions correctly or completely would not be counted as a part of the study. Participants were compensated one dollar each for successful completion of the survey. A total of 161 participants attempted the survey. However, ten of the responses failed the attention check questions and were returned. Thus, a total of 151 valid responses were analyzed, yielding a response rate of 94%.

The pretest sample (N = 151) was composed of 78 females (52%) and 70 males (46%), and others who were non-binary/third gender or preferred not to mention (N = 3; 2%). Age distribution revealed that majority of the participants were in the 25 - 34 age range (N = 58; 38%), followed by 35 - 44 (N = 37; 25%), 45 - 54 (N = 22; 15%), 18 - 24 (N = 19; 13%), 55 - 64 (N = 10; 7%), and 65 or older (N = 5; 3%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were White/Caucasian (N = 84; 56%), followed by Asian (N = 23; 15%), Black or African American (N = 21; 14%), Hispanic/Latin (N = 21; 14%), Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (N = 1; 1%), and Other (N = 1; 1%). With respect to education, the largest group consisted of

respondents with a four-year degree (N = 62; 41%), followed by those with some college education (N = 41; 27%). There were an equal number of participants with a graduate/post-graduate and a high school diploma (N = 21; 14%) respectively, and 6 participants (14%) had a professional degree. The majority were single (N = 90; 60%), followed by married (N = 42; 28%), with divorced (N = 8; 5%), widowed (N = 3; 2%), separated (N = 3; 2%), and other statuses (N = 5; 3%), comprising the rest. With respect to household income before taxes, the highest proportion of participants reported an income between \$20,000 and \$39,999 (N = 33; 22%), followed by \$60,000 - \$79,999 (N = 23; 15%). Fourteen percent of participants reported an income ranging from \$40,000 to \$59,999 (N = 21), and 12% reported incomes of \$150,000 or more (N = 18). The next income range, comprising 13% of participants, reported an income between \$80,000 - \$99,999 (N = 19), followed by 9% of participants reporting incomes less than \$20,000 (N = 14), 9% in the \$100,000 - \$119,999 range (N = 13), and the smallest between \$120,000 - \$149,999, representing 7% of the population (N = 10). With respect to state of residence for the 151 participants, the highest proportion were from California (N = 19; 12.6%), followed by Texas (N = 15; 10%) and Illinois (N = 12; 8%). Florida and New Jersey each had 9 participants (6% each), while New York and Michigan had 8 participants each (5% each). Georgia, North Carolina, and Oregon each contributed 6 participants (4% each). South Carolina, Maryland, and Massachusetts had 4 participants each (3% each). Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Utah, Louisiana, Washington, Kansas, and Minnesota had 3 participants each (2% each). The remaining 19 states, collectively referred to as "Other States," accounted for 21 participants (14%). In terms of the characteristics of the community where the respondents lived, the majority lived in the suburbs near a large city (N = 53; 35%), followed by a small city or town (N = 43; 28%). Twenty-five percent of the participants (N = 37) lived in a large city, and finally, rural

inhabitants comprised 12% (N = 18) of the sample. Lastly, responding to the question about political affiliation, many of the participants were moderately progressive or liberal (N = 51; 34%), followed by those who were very progressive or liberal (N = 37; 25%) and moderate (N = 35; 23%), respectively. Participants who were moderately conservative made up 10% of the sample (N = 15), followed by very conservative participants (N = 10; 7%). Three (2%) participants were unsure or apolitical.

To ensure the quality of the analysis, data cleaning was performed on the sample (N=151) as per Hair et al. (2019). Following Hair et al.'s (2019) recommendation, in preparation for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed to confirm uni-dimensionality, and Cronbach's alphas were calculated to confirm internal reliability of the constructs. EFA was conducted using SPSS 24.0. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was used as the method to extract factors (Hair et al., 2019). Additionally, sampling adequacy was examined through Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure.

A systematic item deletion process was then performed, beginning with items that did not load on any factor, which were deleted. In order to identify which items were retained for each factor, factor loadings were examined. As items with a factor loading of 0.40 or higher are considered to have practical significance, based on the results of the EFA, items indicating low factor loadings (<0.40) and cross-loadings (diff less than 0.20) were deleted (Hair et al., 2019). Items with the lowest loadings for each factor were also deleted. Multiple iterations of EFA were performed until all factor loadings were above 0.40 on the corresponding single factor and lower than 0.40 on all other factors. As Kang and Park-Poaps (2011) recommended, one item was excluded at a time during this process and the EFA was then rerun, as deleting one item may

affect the overall factor structure. As a result, items with the lowest factor loadings were excluded, which resulted in the removal of 12 items. Table 5 shows the factor loadings of the remaining 28 indicators after 12 items were deleted.

Reliability was then tested. Internal reliability using Cronbach’s alpha (α) was assessed to ensure whether those dimensions demonstrated sufficient reliabilities (>0.70) (Forsythe et al., 2006). Most of the items loaded highly onto the expected factors, which offered a meaningful interpretation of the relationships between the items and their corresponding factors. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.82, which is above the threshold of 0.50, indicating sufficient sampling adequacy for exploratory factor analysis. Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity revealed statistical significance ($\chi^2 = 3468.53$, $df = 496$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that there were sufficient correlations among the variables to perform factor analysis. In terms of internal-reliability, Cronbach's alphas for each factor were tested and the results ranged from 0.84 to 0.95, which are over the acceptable threshold of 0.70 and considered excellent (Table 5).

Table 5. Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

Items	Factors						
	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7
Community Attachment – Cronbach’s α 0.875							
CA5	I am satisfied that this is the best possible place I could live in		0.87				
CA6	I would be very sorry if I had to move away from my community		0.85				
CA7	I feel at home in my community		0.85				
CA3	I feel that I fit well into my community		0.76				
Need for Uniqueness – Cronbach’s α 0.932							
NU4	I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands		0.90				

NU6	I am often on the lookout for new products and brands that will add to my personal uniqueness	0.89
NU5	Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image	0.88
NU3	I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original	0.87
Environmental Impacts – Cronbach’s α 0.845		
EI1	Chemical pollutants are produced during manufacturing of synthetic or manufactured fibers such as polyester	0.82
EI3	Textile dyeing and finishing processes use a lot of water	0.79
EI4	Microplastics and phosphate-containing laundry detergents can be a source of water pollution	0.78
EI2	Air pollution can occur during some common dye processes of textiles	0.77
Social Impacts – Cronbach’s α 0.836		
SI5	Apparel manufacturers generally provide hazardous workplaces for their employees	0.83
SI2	Apparel manufacturers generally do not pay their employees at least the local minimum wage	0.83
SI1	Use of child labor is a practice among apparel manufacturers	0.77
SI4	Apparel manufacturers generally have their employees work more than 40 hours per week	0.77
Commitment to Sustainability – Cronbach’s α 0.849		
CS4	Local retailers keep up high ethical standards	0.87
CS3	Local retailers are concerned with improving society welfare	0.73
CS5	Local retailers are socially responsible	0.72
CS6	Local retailers make sustained efforts to create new jobs	0.65
Authenticity – Cronbach’s α 0.872		

PA4	Local retail stores are different from all other stores	0.85
PA5	Local retail stores stand out from all other stores	0.84
PA6	I think local retail stores are unique	0.78
PA7	I think local retail stores clearly distinguish themselves from other stores	0.72
Intention to Patronize Local Retailers – Cronbach’s α 0.945		
IP3	I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products	0.89
IP4	I would be more likely to recommend a local retailer to others if it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products.	0.88
IP5	I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was more committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products than another competing retailer.	0.88
IP2	I have an obligation to support local retailers that are committed to selling fiber should affiliated products.	0.77

As shown in Table 5, the factor loadings matrix indicated that all items loaded strongly onto their respective factors (factor loadings ranged from 0.648 to 0.899). The seven-factor model explained 76.7% of the total variance and the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.82, which is above the threshold of 0.50. Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.84 to 0.95, which exceeded the acceptable criteria of 0.70 and therefore were reliable (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the results were deemed sufficient to move on to the main data collection phase.

Main Study Data Collection

The target sample was an inference sample of the general population made up of individuals that were 18 years of age or older (Lee, 2011). To obtain this sample, a minimum of 300 respondents were recruited via the online research platform Prolific. To encourage

participation, an incentive of \$1.00 was offered per participant. Respondents from online platforms are sufficient for the collection of survey data (Peer et al., 2021), and contain a population that is more representative than college student samples (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

The final survey created in Qualtrics was posted on the Prolific research platform. Since SEM was employed as the statistical method for data analysis, a large sample size was preferred, as they generate more reliable statistical results. Sample sizes smaller than 200 are likely to bring about non-convergence errors (Boomsma & Hoogland, 2001). According to Kim et al. (2015), guidelines for the absolute sample size for a large sample data are greater than 200. Thus, the aim was to get a sample size of no fewer than 200 to avoid non-convergence and ensure robustness of the test results using SEM (Boomsma & Hoogland, 2001).

A standard informed consent statement explaining the objectives of the study, confidentiality, and the researcher's contact information was included at the beginning of the survey. Participants were informed that they could stop the survey at any point by leaving the website.

Statistical Analysis

After completion of the surveys, the dataset was downloaded and tabulated for statistical analysis. The data was screened and cleaned per Hair et al. (2019). Descriptive analyses were run on data related to the demographic questions pertaining to the participant profiles, and characteristics of the sample were delineated. Once the final sample was determined, the analysis proceeded to the next stage using a structural equation modeling approach with the statistical package SPSS AMOS version 29 (Arbuckle, 2021).

Measurement Model

Given the need to examine inter-relationships and address measurement error in the developed instrument, the analysis was conducted using the multivariate technique of structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM not only accommodates measurement error but also enables the examination of distinct relationships among sets of dependent variables (Hair et al., 2019). As highlighted by Hair et al. (2019), SEM “provides the appropriate and most efficient estimate technique for a series of separate multiple regression equations estimated simultaneously” (p. 19). Moreover, SEM offers the advantage of estimating multiple relationships concurrently while controlling for type I error (Kline, 2016). A two-step approach was used for model identification, wherein the measurement part and the structural part were evaluated separately (Kline, 2016).

The software IBM SPSS AMOS version 29 was used for the data analysis. AMOS uses a full information maximum likelihood estimation for model parameters and hypothesis testing (Arbuckle, 2021). Although the measurement instrument was adapted from the literature, it was also tested with regard to factor cross-loadings. Exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify items that possessed a low item-to-total correlation or high cross-loading. Items with low factor loadings and cross-loadings were dropped (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2006).

The measurement model tested the hypotheses regarding the relationships between indicators (observed variables) and underlying constructs (latent variables) as outlined by Hair et al. (2019). According to Hair et al. (2019), the two primary objectives of the measurement model are (1) to define indicators for each construct and (2) to evaluate the reliability of each construct in estimating causal relationships.

Hair et al. (2019) recommended confirming an acceptable level of goodness-of-fit for the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) before evaluating other

psychometric properties. According to Hair et al. (2019), a minimum of three indices should be assessed to determine the model fit. As a norm, multiple fit indices including (1) exact fit statistics (Model chi-square χ^2), (2) the absolute fit indices of Root Mean Square Estimation of Approximation (RMSEA) and Standardized Root Mean Square (SRMR), and (3) the comparative fit indices of Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) are used to test the relationships (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The χ^2 is the result of comparison between the estimated covariance matrix (the observed covariance matrix) and implied covariance matrix, and an insignificant χ^2 is preferred. However, empirical studies with large sample sizes (more than 100) normally do not show insignificant χ^2 results. Hence, the normed- χ^2 ($\chi^2/\text{degree of freedom}$) is advised because of its lower sensitivity to larger sample sizes (greater than 100). A value < 5 indicates model acceptance (Schumacker & Lomax, 2008). Additionally, Hair et al. (2019) suggest that the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should both exceed 0.9, indicating that additional model specification would not significantly enhance the model fit. Additionally, a cutoff value of less than .08 for root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) should be used (Hu & Bentler, 1999). These criteria are required to ensure a good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data before proceeding to assess psychometric properties of the constructs.

The initial psychometric property under examination is the internal consistency of a set of scales or test of item reliability. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient exceeding 0.7 indicates good reliability, while values below 0.6 should be rejected (Hair et al., 2019). The second property to be evaluated is the composite reliability (CR) of each construct, calculated based on indicator loadings and error variances from the standardized solution (Kline, 2016). A CR value surpassing 0.70 signifies reliable measurement of the latent construct within the structural model

(Kline, 2016). The third property to be scrutinized is convergent validity, achieved when items in a measurement construct share a substantial proportion of variance (Hair et al., 2019). Hair et al. (2019) recommends assessing convergent validity against two criteria: significant and at least 0.5 or higher standardized loading estimates, with an ideal value of 0.7 or higher, and average variance extracted (AVE) greater than or equal to 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). The final property to be addressed is discriminant validity, gauging the distinctiveness of one construct from another. O'Leary-Kelly and Vokurka (1998) propose two methods for assessing discriminant validity in a CFA model. One method involves contrasting two CFA models, the first in which the correlation between a pair of latent variables is fixed at 1.0, and the second in which the correlation is allowed to vary. On making individual comparisons for each pair of latent variables, a notably lower chi-square value for the unconstrained model compared to the constrained model offers evidence for discriminant validity. Conversely, the second method entails assessing whether the AVE of each latent construct is higher than the highest squared correlation with any other latent construct. Satisfaction of either of these tests confirms discriminant validity. Acceptable results in either of these tests indicate discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Structural Model

Once the measurement model was found acceptable, the structural model was evaluated. The model proposed was a recursive model, in that all the paths between the different latent variables were unidirectional and proceeded from the predictor construct to the dependent construct. Structural equation modeling was used to assess the proposed model's goodness-of-fit and indicate whether the proposed model is acceptable, or if an alternate model should be tested for fit indices (Hair et al., 2019). The overall fit indices that were used to assess the measurement

model were again used to assess the structural model using the same criteria (i.e., χ^2 , normed- χ^2 , CFI, TLI, and RMSEA).

Upon confirmation of a satisfactory model fit, a latent variable path analysis was employed to assess the hypothesized relationships between constructs. Path analysis offers a method for analyzing relationships based on correlations between constructs within the specified model (Hair et al., 2019). The path coefficients were evaluated to ascertain the interrelations between constructs and to determine whether they are significant. The path coefficients provided direct empirical evidence as to whether a relationship exists between the hypothesized constructs.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research design to address the purpose and objectives of this dissertation. Results of qualitative research conducted in Phase I were discussed. Detailed discussion of the main study (Phase II) was then provided, including instrument development, sample selection, and data collection strategy. Finally, the approaches to data analysis were discussed. The next chapter provides the statistical data analysis and results of the hypotheses testing. First, the characteristics of the sample are delineated. Then, results of the measurement model, structural equation model, and hypotheses testing are provided. Concluding the chapter is a summary of the results of each hypothesis.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

This chapter provides the results of the statistical analysis and includes the following sections: (1) Description of Sample and Responses; (2) Measurement Model Analysis; (3) Structural Model Analysis; and (4) Summary. In the first part of the chapter, a detailed overview of the sample characteristics and responses are provided. In the second section, the analysis of the measurement model is provided. The third section reports the structural model analysis and results of the hypothesis testing (Chapter V provides a detailed discussion of the study results). The chapter is summarized in the fourth section.

Description of Sample and Responses

The Qualtrics based survey for data collection for the main study was administered through the online research platform Prolific after receiving IRB approval (Appendix D). The questionnaire consisted of two parts: main survey questions specific to the study, followed by demographic information. Other than the demographic questions, all responses to the survey questions were captured using a 5-point Likert Scale (from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree). Respondents who were over the age of 18 and based in the United States were recruited for the survey.

DeSimone et al. (2015) pointed out that survey respondents differ in their levels of attention and effort when responding to items, leading to differences in quality among responses. Therefore, to ensure that participants were paying attention to the questions, there were two attention check items in the questionnaire. Both questions were designed to measure respondents' engagement and ensure collection of quality data for the study. Moreover, the Prolific study was designed in a way that participants who failed the attention check questions

were automatically rejected. Only fully completed responses from the participants were accepted. In total, 311 participants attempted the survey. However, nine surveys were returned because of failure to answer the attention check questions correctly and completely, and two surveys timed out and were rejected. There were no invalid or incomplete data present in the sample. The final sample of 300 complete responses were used in the data analysis.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 6. The final sample (N = 300) was composed of 149 females (50%) and 144 males (48%), and others who were third gender/binary or preferred not to mention (N = 7; 2%). Age distribution revealed the majority of the participants were in the 25 - 34 age range (N = 98; 33%), followed by age ranges 35 - 44 (N = 84; 28%), 18 - 24 (N = 41; 14%), 45 - 54 (N = 30; 10%), and 55 - 64 (N = 28; 9%). Those 65 and older constituted the smallest group (N = 19; 6%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of participants were Caucasian/White (N = 194; 65%), followed by Asian (N = 37; 12%), Black/African American (N = 36; 12%), Hispanic/Latino (N = 19; 6%), and others (N = 14; 5%) respectively. With respect to education, the majority of participants had a 4-year degree (N = 117; 39%), followed by some college (N = 99; 33%), and graduate/post graduate degree (N = 38; 13%). Thirty-eight participants had only a high school diploma (13%), and eight participants (3%) had a professional degree. The majority were single (N = 162; 54%), followed by married (N = 92; 31%), with divorced (N = 28; 9%), widowed (N = 4; 1%), separated (N = 3; 1%), and other statuses (N = 11; 4%) making up the rest. With respect to household income before taxes, the highest proportion of participants reported an income between \$60,000 and \$79,999 (N = 57; 19%), followed by \$20,000 - \$39,999 (N = 56; 19%). Fifteen percent of participants reported an income ranging from \$40,000 to \$59,999 (N = 45), and 13% reported incomes less than \$20,000 (N = 39). The next income range, comprising 11% of participants,

reported an income between \$80,000 - \$99,999 (N = 33), followed by 9% of participants in the \$120,000 - \$149,999 range (N = 28), 8% reporting an income of \$150,000 or more (N = 24), and the smallest between \$100,000 - \$119,999, representing 6% of the population (N = 18). With respect to state of residence, the highest proportion of participants were from California (N = 45; 15%). Florida and Texas had equal representation with 26 participants each (8.7% each). North Carolina had 16 participants (5.3%). New York and Arizona both had 12 participants (4% each). Pennsylvania had 11 participants (3.7%). Ohio, New Jersey, and Georgia each contributed 10 participants (3.3% each). Colorado had 8 participants (2.7%), while Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Michigan had 7 participants each (2.3% each). Illinois and Louisiana both had 6 participants (2% each). Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, and Oregon each had 5 participants (1.7% each). Nebraska, South Carolina, Washington, and Nevada each had 4 participants (1.3% each). The remaining 22 states, collectively referred to as "Other States," accounted for 46 participants (15.3%). In terms of the characteristics of the community where the respondents lived, the majority lived in the suburbs near a large city (N = 102; 34%), followed by a small city or town (N = 84; 28%). Twenty four percent of the participants (N = 72) lived in a large city, and finally, rural inhabitants comprised 14% (N = 42) of the sample. Lastly, responding to question about political affiliation, the majority of the participants were very progressive (N = 85; 28%), followed by those who were moderate (N = 77; 26%), and moderately progressive (N = 75; 25%) respectively. Participants who were moderately conservative made up 15% of the sample (N = 45), followed by very conservative participants (N = 13; 4%). Five (2%) participants were apolitical. Table 6 shows the composition of the sample demographics, segmented by gender.

Table 6. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

	Female	%	Male	%	Others	%	Total	%
Gender	149	50%	144	48%	7	2%	300	100%
Age (Year)								
18 – 24	18	12%	23	16%		0%	41	14%
25 – 34	49	33%	44	31%	5	71%	98	33%
35 – 44	35	23%	48	33%	1	14%	84	28%
45 – 54	17	11%	12	8%	1	14%	30	10%
55 – 64	19	13%	9	6%		0%	28	9%
65 and Older	11	7%	8	6%		0%	19	6%
Ethnicity								
White/Caucasian	104	70%	85	59%	5	71%	194	65%
Asian	16	11%	21	15%		0%	37	12%
Black/African American	14	9%	21	15%	1	14%	36	12%
Hispanic/Latin	7	5%	11	8%	1	14%	19	6%
Others	8	5%	6	4%		0%	14	5%
Education Level								
4-year degree	63	42%	52	36%	2	29%	117	39%
Some college	53	36%	44	31%	2	29%	99	33%
Graduate/Postgraduate	17	11%	20	14%	1	14%	38	13%
High school graduate	11	7%	25	17%	2	29%	38	13%
Professional degree	5	3%	3	2%		0%	8	3%
Marital Status								
Single	64	43%	92	64%	6	86%	162	54%
Married	57	38%	35	24%		0%	92	31%
Divorced	18	12%	10	7%		0%	28	9%
Other	5	3%	5	3%	1	14%	11	4%
Widowed	3	2%	1	1%		0%	4	1%
Separated	2	1%	1	1%		0%	3	1%
Annual Household Income Before Taxes								
Less than \$20,000	22	15%	14	10%	3	43%	39	13%
\$20,000 - \$39,999	28	19%	26	18%	2	29%	56	19%
\$40,000 - \$59,999	19	13%	25	17%	1	14%	45	15%
\$60,000 - \$79,999	24	16%	32	22%	1	14%	57	19%
\$80,000 - \$99,999	17	11%	16	11%		0%	33	11%
\$100,000 - \$119,999	7	5%	11	8%		0%	18	6%
\$120,000 - \$149,999	20	13%	8	6%		0%	28	9%
\$150,000 or more	12	8%	12	8%		0%	24	8%

Community Characteristics								
A large city (Population > 500,000)	28	19%	43	30%	1	14%	72	24%
A suburb near a large city	54	36%	46	32%	2	29%	102	34%
A small city or town (50,000 - 499,999)	48	32%	34	24%	2	29%	84	28%
A rural area	19	13%	21	15%	2	29%	42	14%
Political Orientation								
Very conservative	8	5%	5	3%		0%	13	4%
Moderately conservative	23	15%	22	15%		0%	45	15%
Moderate	33	22%	44	31%		0%	77	26%
Moderately progressive	44	30%	29	20%	2	29%	75	25%
Very progressive	38	26%	42	29%	5	71%	85	28%
Unsure or apolitical	3	2%	2	1%		0%	5	2%

Measurement Model

As discussed in Chapter III, a two-step approach to structural equation modeling (SEM) was adopted to identify the model and test the hypotheses, evaluating the measurement part and structural part of the model separately (Kline, 2016). Measurement model analysis was based on seven latent constructs: (1) Community Attachment; (2) Need for Uniqueness; (3) Environmental Impact; (4) Social Impact; (5) Commitment to Sustainability; (6) Authenticity; and (7) Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products (Figure 21).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Following Kline's (2016) recommendations, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the measurement model. The measurement model was assessed using IBM SPSS AMOS version 29 (Arbuckle, 2021). Given that the measurement model was recursive and fully identifiable, full information maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) was applied to estimate the model parameters (Kline, 2016).

The overall adequacy of the measurement model is reflected in its global fit, indicating the degree to which designated indicators capture the identified constructs (Kline, 2016). According to the literature, multiple measures of fit like Chi-Square, TLI, CFI, and RMSEA are recommended when reporting the results of CFA and SEM (Hair et al., 2019). Table 7 presents the Goodness-of-Fit summary for the measurement model.

Table 7. Measurement Model Goodness of Fit Summary

Fit Measure	Fit Guideline Criteria	Measurement Model Result	Acceptance
Chi-Square	p>0.05	p<0.001	No
Normed Chi-Square ($\chi^2/\text{degree of freedom}$)	<5.00	1.987	Yes
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	>0.90	0.941	Yes
Tucker Lewis Index (TLI)	>0.90	0.932	Yes
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	<0.08	0.057 (CI _{90%} = 0.051 – 0.064)	Yes

Note. Source: Hu, L., and Bentler, P.M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling*, 6(1), 1-55.

As presented in Table 7, the absolute fit measure of Chi-square was significant ($\chi^2 = 653.758$, $df = 329$, $p < 0.001$). A significant Chi-square means that the intrinsic data pattern does not fit the hypothesized research model (Hair et al., 2019; Hu & Bentler, 1999). However, Chi-square is a measure that is extremely sensitive to sample size (Hooper et al., 2008). Because of the sample size of the data collected in this study ($N = 300$), a significant Chi-square is somewhat inevitable and expected (Kline, 2016). Therefore, it can be misleading to make a judgment simply based on the Chi-square test of model fit. To address the sample size sensitivity

of the Chi-square test, scholars have argued that the Normed Chi-square test of model fit (Chi-square / degree of freedom) is a more suitable measure when making decisions about SEM model fit. The normed Chi-square 1.987 (653.758/329) was well below the suggested cutoff of 5 (Hooper et al., 2008; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) at 0.941 and Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) at 0.932 were within the good fit criteria of 0.90, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) of 0.057 was within the limit of 0.08. With regards to the 90% confidence interval for RMSEA, the upper bound was 0.064, which was less than 0.10, which indicated a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Based on the fit statistics, the measurement model was deemed to satisfy overall levels of acceptable fit.

Evaluating the Parameter Estimates

Moving on to the factor analysis phase, unstandardized factor loadings, z-statistics, p-values, and fully standardized factor loadings were assessed for each research construct within the measurement model. The results are presented in Table 8. Four items were used to measure Community Attachment (CA), with observed standardized factor loadings ranging from 0.762 to 0.898. For the measure of Need for Uniqueness (NU), four items were used with standardized factor loadings ranging between 0.790 and 0.895. For the measures of Environmental Impact (EI), four items with factor loadings between 0.726 and 0.807 and for Social Impact (SI), four items with factor loadings between 0.671 and 0.845 were used. For consumers' perceptions of local retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS), four items with factor loadings ranging from 0.727 to 0.877 were used, and four items for Authenticity (PA) with factor loadings between 0.793 and 0.879 were used. Finally, intention to patronize local retailers (IP) was measured using four items with observed factor loadings ranging from 0.674 to 0.939.

Table 8. Results of the Measurement Model: Factor Loadings, Z-statistics

Construct		Unstandardized Factor Loadings	z-statistics (C.R.)	Completely Standardized Factor Loadings (λ)
Community Attachment (CA)	CA3	0.774	15.590	0.762
	CA5	1.009	16.340	0.786
	CA6	0.990	15.921	0.772
	CA7	1.000		0.898
Need for Uniqueness (NU)	NU3	0.802	17.554	0.790
	NU4	0.955	20.554	0.860
	NU5	0.965	21.650	0.885
	NU6	1.000		0.895
Environmental Impact (EI)	EI1	1.058	12.271	0.773
	EI2	1.151	12.714	0.807
	EI3	1.183	12.346	0.779
	EI4	1.000		0.726
Social Impact (SI)	SI1	0.867	11.879	0.671
	SI2	0.932	13.933	0.773
	SI4	0.782	13.278	0.739
	SI5	1.000		0.845
Commitment to Sustainability (CS)	CS3	1.119	13.642	0.816
	CS4	1.142	14.584	0.877
	CS5	1.114	14.017	0.839
	CS6	1.000		0.727
Authenticity (PA)	PA4	0.858	16.852	0.793
	PA5	0.919	17.531	0.813
	PA6	0.930	18.340	0.835
	PA7	1.000		0.879
Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	IP2	0.782	14.354	0.674
	IP3	0.901	26.882	0.910
	IP4	0.969	29.372	0.939
	IP5	1.000		0.927

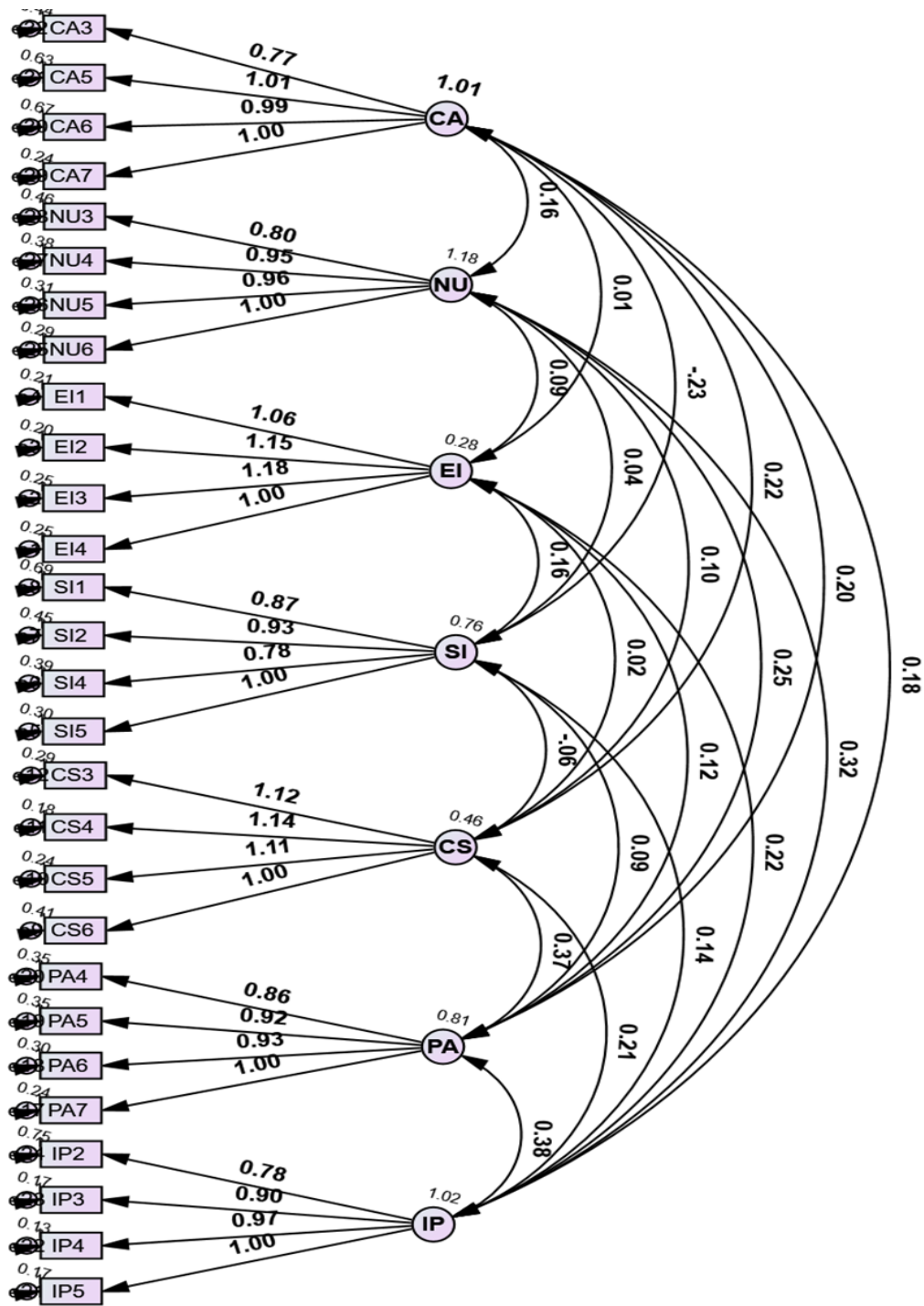
Note. 1. λ (Lambda): Completely Standardized Factor Loadings Value. Last λ path was set to 1, therefore, no C.R. is given.

2. All factor loadings were significant at $p < 0.001$.

The measurement model for the unstandardized solution is shown in Figure 21 and the completely standardized solution is shown in Figure 22. Each estimated parameter was assessed

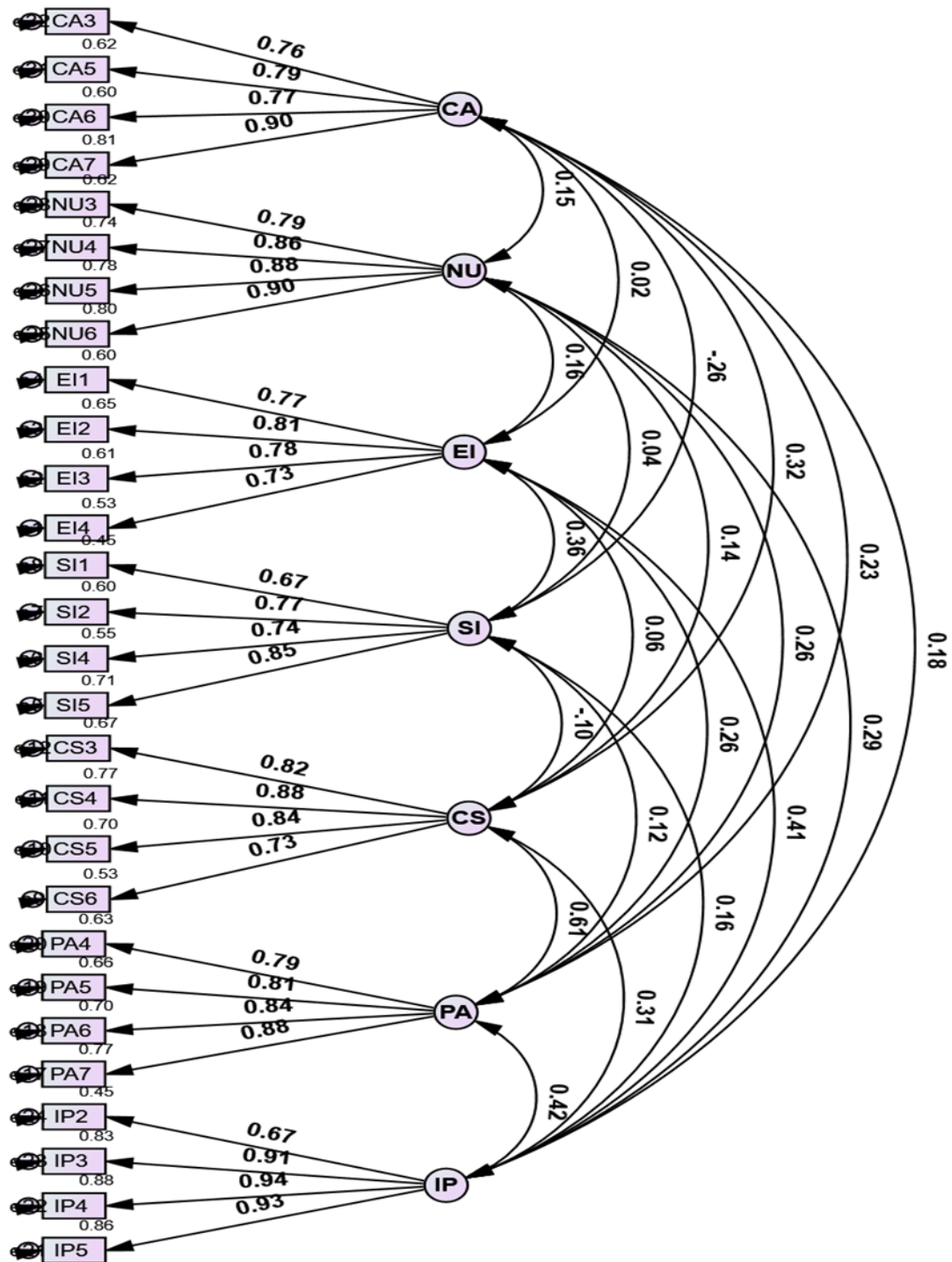
by its p-value to ascertain its statistical significance. The p-values of all path parameter estimates were less than 0.05 and therefore all were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The inter-factor correlations for Community Attachment, Need for Uniqueness, Environmental Impact, Social Impact, Commitment to Sustainability, Authenticity, and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers were all significantly correlated at $p < 0.05$.

Figure 21. Measurement Model with Unstandardized Parameter Estimates



Note. All parameter estimates (factor loadings, inter-factor correlations) are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. $N = 300$.

Figure 22. Measurement Model with Standardized Parameter Estimates



Note. All parameter estimates (factor loadings, inter-factor correlations) are statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. $N = 300$.

In sum, the CFA results of the multi-item scales in the measurement model (Table 7) showed that the indicators for each construct were statistically significant, with standardized factor loadings greater than 0.50 (Table 8), which were considered satisfactory for measuring the research constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2016).

Psychometric Properties

Reliability

As shown in Table 9, the psychometric characteristics of the measurement model were determined and assessed to evaluate the reliability and validity of the measurement items. Given that the existing constructs consist of composite traits, it is essential to test the consistency of the measurement scales to ensure that the simultaneous error of all observed variables accurately loads onto the underlying latent constructs. Hence, reliability assessment was conducted for all constructs utilizing composite reliability (CR) to ascertain the reliability of the multi-item scales. Composite reliability (CR) of each construct was evaluated using individual indicators based on their loadings and standardized error variances (Kline, 2016). The composite reliability coefficients for the relevant constructs varied between 0.844 and 0.924, suggesting robust composite reliability (above 0.70) in gauging the underlying constructs (Kline, 2016). Next, internal reliability using Cronbach's α was also examined. All the values of Cronbach's α ranged between 0.839 and 0.918 (above the threshold of reliability coefficient of 0.70), indicating a satisfactory level of reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

Convergent Validity

After establishing the reliability of the instrument, evidence of construct validity was examined through convergent and discriminant validity. Construct validity indicates the extent to which a measure actually gauges the construct it is supposed to measure (Bagozzi et al., 1991).

Convergent validity ensures that one construct is correlated with another construct that is theoretically similar (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2016). Following the steps suggested by Hair et al. (2019) and Kline (2016), three statistics, based on the results of CFA, were used to measure convergent validity: (1) factor loading; (2) composite reliability (CR); and (3) average variance extracted (AVE). The factor loadings generated during CFA were used to manually compute both the CR and the AVE.

As discussed earlier, all standardized confirmatory factor loadings were between 0.671 and 0.939, and all were significant and above the threshold of 0.50 suggested by Hair et al. (2019). Next, CR was calculated to assess the internal consistency across the items measuring a construct, yielding estimates between 0.844 and 0.924 and exceeding the recommended criteria of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Following Fornell and Larcker's (1981) guidelines, the AVE was then evaluated to estimate the proportion of variance explained by each construct relative to the instrument's measurement error. AVE values ranged from 0.577 to 0.756, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.50. Therefore, convergent validity of all factors was confirmed (see Table 9).

Table 9. Measurement Reliability and Validity

Construct	Standardized Factor Loading λ	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Community Attachment		0.877	0.881	0.650
CA3	0.762			
CA5	0.786			
CA6	0.772			
CA7	0.898			
Need for Uniqueness		0.918	0.918	0.737
NU3	0.790			
NU4	0.860			

NU5	0.885			
NU6	0.895			
Environmental Impact		0.854	0.855	0.596
EI1	0.773			
EI2	0.807			
EI3	0.779			
EI4	0.726			
Social Impact		0.839	0.844	0.577
SI1	0.671			
SI2	0.773			
SI4	0.739			
SI5	0.845			
Commitment to Sustainability		0.886	0.889	0.667
CS3	0.816			
CS4	0.877			
CS5	0.839			
CS6	0.727			
Authenticity		0.899	0.899	0.690
PA4	0.793			
PA5	0.813			
PA6	0.835			
PA7	0.879			
Intention to Patronize		0.915	0.924	0.756
IP2	0.674			
IP3	0.910			
IP4	0.939			
IP5	0.927			

Note.

$$\text{Composite Factor Reliability (CR)} = \frac{(\sum\lambda)^2}{(\sum\lambda)^2 + \sum\theta}$$

$$\text{Average Variance Extracted Values (AVE)} = \frac{\sum\lambda^2}{\sum\lambda^2 + \sum\theta}$$

λ (Lambda): Completely Standardized Factor Loadings Value

θ (Theta-Delta): Indicator error variances

Discriminant Validity

The final psychometric property of discriminant validity measures the degree to which a construct is “truly distinct from other constructs or variables” (Hair et al., 2019, p. 678). Thus, high discriminant validity ensures that a construct is unique from the other constructs by capturing some measures that others do not (Hair et al., 2019). A conservative approach for establishing discriminant validity is to “compare the average variance extracted (AVE) values for any two constructs with the square of the correlation estimate between these two constructs” (Hair et al., 2019, p. 677). If the AVE estimate for the construct is greater than the corresponding squared inter-construct correlation estimates, this provides evidence of discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). As indicated in Table 10, the results indicated that discriminant validity was established because AVEs (ranging from 0.577 to 0.756) exceeded all the squared inter-construct correlations (ranging from 0.000 to 0.372). Discriminant validity confirmed that the seven factors are distinct from each other.

Table 10. Discriminant Validity Matrix (AVE and Squared Inter-Construct Correlations)

	CA	NU	EI	SI	CS	PA	IP
CA	0.650	-	-	-	-	-	-
NU	0.023	0.737	-	-	-	-	-
EI	0.000	0.026	0.596	-	-	-	-
SI	0.067	0.002	0.127	0.577	-	-	-
CS	0.104	0.019	0.004	0.010	0.667	-	-
PA	0.051	0.068	0.068	0.014	0.372	0.690	-
IP	0.033	0.084	0.166	0.025	0.094	0.178	0.756

Note: Diagonal bolded numbers are the AVEs for each factor. Numbers on the off diagonals are the squared inter-construct correlations.

Results of measurement model fit, reliability, and validity were deemed sufficient to

proceed to structural regression model analysis, as per the SEM literature (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2016).

Structural Equation Model

Structural Model

After assessing measurement model fit, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized structural model. Once again, the fit indices that were adopted to test the measurement model were used to assess the structural model. As indicated in Table 11, all model fit indices were satisfactory.: $\chi^2 = 807.660$, $df = 336$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.404$; CFI = 0.914, TLI = 0.904; RMSEA = 0.069 (CI_{90%} = 0.062 -0.075). As with the measurement model, the Normed- χ^2 (χ^2/df) was less than the recommended cut-off of 5 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The CFI and TLI values were greater than the recommended criterion of 0.90 (Hair et al., 2019). RMSEA also met the recommended threshold of ≤ 0.08 . In the 90% confidence interval for RMSEA, the upper bound was 0.075, which is less than the recommended criterion of 0.10, indicating a good fit. As the fit indices showed satisfactory model fit, the structural model was deemed acceptable.

Table 11. Structural Model Fit Evaluation

Fit Indices	Fit Guideline Criteria	Structural Model Result	Acceptance
Chi-square	p>0.05	p<0.001	No
Normed Chi-Square ($\chi^2/$ degree of freedom)	<5.00	2.404	Yes
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	>0.90	0.914	Yes
Tucker Lewis Index (TLI)	>0.90	0.904	Yes
Root Mean Square Error Of Approximation (RMSEA)	<0.08	0.069 (CI _{90%} = 0.062 – 0.075)	Yes

Given the satisfactory fit of the structural model, path analysis was then conducted for the hypotheses testing. The results of analyzing the full latent variable path analysis model are

presented in Figure 23. Standardized path coefficients in the path analysis of SEM are regression weights of the hypothesized relationships in linear regression models and can be interpreted as such (Hair et al., 2019; Kline, 2016).

With regards to the consumer value of community attachment (CA), the paths between CA and commitment to sustainability (CS) (H1a: $\gamma = 0.315, z = 4.888, p < 0.001$) and perceived authenticity (PA) (H1b: $\gamma = 0.239, z = 3.920, p < 0.001$) were significant. The path between CA and intention to patronize local retailers (IP) (H3: $\gamma = 0.085, z = 1.397, p > 0.05$) was not significant. Therefore, H1a and H1b were supported, while H3 was not supported.

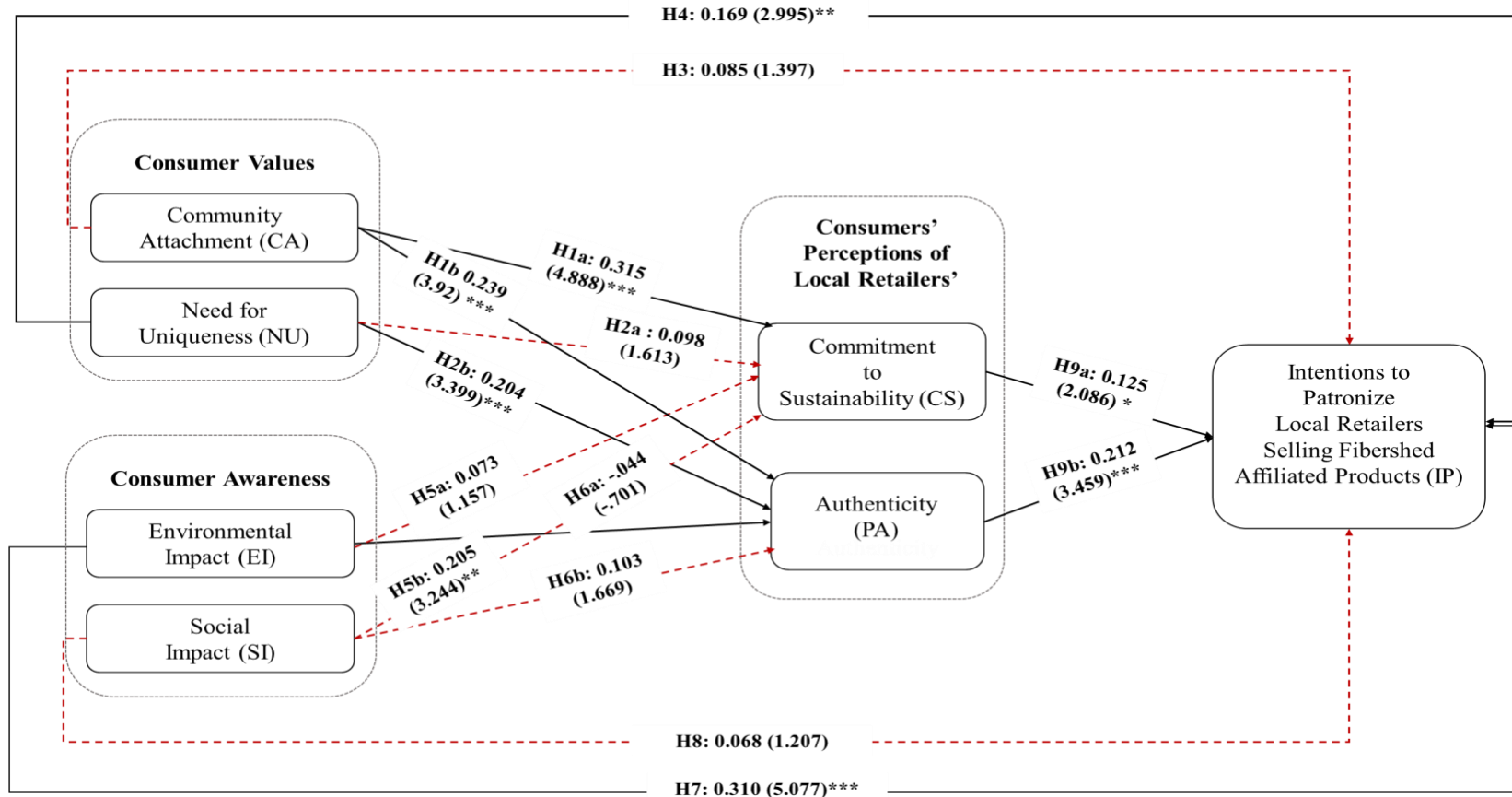
With regards to the relationship between need for uniqueness (NU) and CS, the result (H2a: $\gamma = 0.098, z = 1.613, p > 0.05$) was non-significant. The paths between NU and PA (H2b: $\gamma = 0.204, z = 3.399, p < 0.001$) and IP (H4: $\gamma = 0.169, z = 2.995, p < 0.01$) were significant. Therefore, H2b and H4 were supported, while H2a was not supported.

The path between consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production (EI) and CS (H5a: $\gamma = 0.073, z = 1.157, p > 0.05$) was non-significant. The paths between EI and PA (H5b: $\gamma = 0.205, z = 3.244, p < 0.01$) and IP (H7: $\gamma = 0.310, z = 5.077, p < 0.001$) were significant. Therefore, H5b and H7 were supported, while H5a was not supported.

With regards to consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production (SI), all three paths, the first leading to CS (H6a: $\gamma = -0.044, z = -0.701, p > 0.05$), the second to PA (H6b: $\gamma = 0.103, z = 1.699, p > 0.05$) and the third to IP (H8: $\gamma = 0.068, z = 1.207, p > 0.05$) were non-significant. Therefore, H6a, H6b, and H8 were not supported.

With regards to consumers' perceptions of local retailers and IP, the path between CS and IP (H9a: $\beta = 0.125$, $z = 2.086$, $p < 0.05$) and the path between PA and IP (H9b: $\beta = 0.212$, $z = 3.459$, $p < 0.001$) were both significant. Therefore, H9a and H9b were supported.

Figure 23. Structural Model with Results of Hypotheses Testing



Note. Indicator variables and disturbances have been omitted for notational simplicity. Coefficients from completely standardized solution. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant, and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships. p-value (two-tailed): * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Hypothesis Testing

Testing of the hypotheses was performed on the relationships depicted in the structural model. Table 12 (below) and Figure 23 (above) summarize the results and estimates of the hypothesized relationships in the model. For H1a, H1b, H2b, H4, H5b, H7, H9a and H9b, the path coefficients were statistically significant, and therefore these hypotheses were supported. However, path coefficients were non-significant for H2a, H3, H5a, H6a, H6b, and H8, suggesting that there was not sufficient evidence that significant relationships exist for these paths. Applying the theoretical framework of SPT and considering the existing literature, detailed discussion of the results of the hypotheses testing are provided in Chapter V.

Table 12. Results of SEM and Hypotheses Testing

	Hypotheses	Standardized Path Coefficient	Standard Error (SE)	z -value	Supported / Not Supported
H1a	Community Attachment (CA) → Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS)	0.315	0.043	4.888****	Supported
H1b	Community Attachment (CA) → Retailers' Authenticity (PA)	0.239	0.054	3.920****	Supported
H2a	Need for Uniqueness (NU) → Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS)	0.098	0.037	1.613	Not Supported
H2b	Need for Uniqueness (NU) → Retailers' Authenticity (PA)	0.204	0.049	3.399****	Supported
H3	Community Attachment (CA) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.085	0.059	1.397	Not Supported
H4	Need for Uniqueness (NU) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.169	0.051	2.995**	Supported
H5a	Environmental Impact (EI) → Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS)	0.073	0.080	1.157	Not Supported

H5b	Environmental Impact (EI) → Retailers' Authenticity (PA)	0.205	0.106	3.244**	Supported
H6a	Social Impact (SI) → Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS)	-0.044	0.048	-0.701	Not Supported
H6b	Social Impact (SI) → Retailers' Authenticity (PA)	0.103	0.063	1.669	Not Supported
H7	Environmental Impact (EI) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.310	0.113	5.077***	Supported
H8	Social Impact (SI) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.068	0.063	1.207	Not Supported
H9a	Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability (CS) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.125	0.087	2.086*	Supported
H9b	Retailers' Authenticity (PA) → Intention to Patronize Local Retailers (IP)	0.212	0.067	3.459***	Supported

Note: N = 300. p-value (two-tailed): * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Mediation Analysis

As shown in Figure 23 (see page 175), although the direct relation between CA and IP was not supported (H3), the paths between CA and IP mediated by consumer perception of CS (H1a, H9a) and PA (H1b, H9b) were significant, indicating the mediating role of CS and PA in the relationship between CA and PI. Furthermore, as elaborated below, PA was found to mediate the relationship between NU and IP, as well as between EI and IP. Therefore, a mediation analysis was conducted to further investigate the relationships between the constructs. The analysis examined the direct and indirect effects of CA, NU, and EI on IP. The mediating variables of PA and CS were considered in this analysis.

To determine the extent of mediation (whether partial or full), three links must be considered: the relationship between the independent and dependent variables, the independent variable and the mediator, and the mediator and dependent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hair et al., 2019). Partial mediation occurs when the direct impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable is reduced but remains significant in the presence of the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hair et al., 2019). In contrast, full mediation is identified when the direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable becomes insignificant in the presence of the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hair et al., 2019). The distinction between partial and full mediation relies on the significance of the direct relationship between the independent and dependent variables in the presence of the mediator.

The indirect effects were analyzed by specifying user-defined estimands via the bootstrapping procedure (N = 2000) with a 95% confidence interval using IBM SPSS AMOS version 29 (Arbuckle, 2021). The user-defined estimand allows for the definition of indirect effects and subsequent estimation through the bias-corrected bootstrap procedure (Arbuckle, 2021). As shown in Table 13, significant indirect effects of CA, NU, and EI on IP were detected with p-values between 0.001 and 0.05 except for the effect of CA on IP via the mediator CS. The paths CA to CS (H1a) and CS to IP (H9a) were found to be significant in the main structural model analysis, but the indirect path CA-CS-IP was found to be non-significant in the mediating analysis. However, the total indirect path CA-CS/PA-IP was significant, considering the indirect mediation effects of both CS and PA. All path coefficients were within the confidence intervals of the bootstrap results (i.e., bootstrap confidence intervals of significant paths did not include zero), except for the two non-significant relationships (Arbuckle, 2021). Thus, the bootstrap

results confirmed the significant mediating role that consumers' perceptions play in the relationships between consumer values and intentions, and consumer awareness and intentions.

Table 13. Mediation Analysis

Path	Standardized Estimates	Estimate	Bias Corrected Confidence Interval		p-value
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
CA - CS – IP (Indirect)	0.039	0.038	-0.002	0.103	0.064
CA - PA – IP (Indirect)	0.051	0.049	0.012	0.123	0.008**
CA - CS / PA - IP (Total Indirect)	0.090	0.087	0.038	0.170	0.000***
CA - IP (Direct)	0.085	0.082	-0.063	0.227	0.298
CA - IP (Total)	0.175	0.170	0.024	0.305	0.021*
NU - PA - IP (Indirect)	0.043	0.039	0.007	0.095	0.010*
NU - IP (Direct)	0.169	0.152	0.026	0.268	0.017*
NU - IP (Total)	0.224	0.191	0.069	0.313	0.002**
EI - PA - IP (Indirect)	0.043	0.080	0.014	0.210	0.009**
EI - IP (Direct)	0.310	0.574	0.338	0.812	0.001***
EI - IP (Total)	0.363	0.654	0.429	0.891	0.001***

Note: N = 300. p-value (two-tailed): * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The mediation analysis revealed that PA fully mediates the relationship between CA and IP. The inclusion of PA in the model rendered the direct effect of CA on IP non-significant (CA-IP direct effect = 0.085, p>0.05), while the indirect effect through PA (CA- PA – IP indirect effect = 0.051, p<0.01) and total indirect effect (CA - CS / PA – IP = 0.090, p<0.001) were significant. This finding suggests that PA explains most of the relationship between CA and IP, indicating a case of full mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

The analysis also revealed that PA partially mediates the relationships between NU and IP, and between EI and IP. NU had a significant total effect on IP (NU – IP total effect = 0.224, $p < 0.01$), with a significant direct effect (NU – IP direct effect = 0.169, $p < 0.05$) and a significant indirect effect through PA (NU – PA – IP indirect effect = 0.043, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, EI had a significant total effect on IP (EI – IP total effect = 0.363, $p < 0.001$) with both a significant direct effect (EI – IP direct effect = 0.310, $p < 0.001$) and a significant indirect effect through PA (EI – PA – IP indirect effect = 0.043, $p < 0.01$). The inclusion of PA in the model reduced the magnitude of the direct effects of NU and EI on IP, but these direct effects remained statistically significant, indicating cases of partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hair et al., 2019).

Summary

In this chapter, the procedures for survey data collection and analysis were described, along with details on sample and responses, as well as the analyses of measurement and structural models. Hypothesized relationships in the structural model were tested and the findings were presented. In the next chapter, the results of the hypothesis testing are discussed relative to the purpose and objectives as well as the theoretical framework. Conclusions will also be presented. Theoretical and managerial implications of this study are discussed along with limitations of the study, and future research directions are provided.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results presented in Chapter IV, this chapter discusses the findings of the dissertation in detail. The chapter is organized as follows: (1) Discussion; (2) Conclusions; (3) Implications; (4) Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research. The first section summarizes major findings in Phase I and Phase 2 of the dissertation relative to the proposed objectives. The second section provides the conclusions. In the third section, the study's implications for academic research, industry practice, and the Fibershed Organization are discussed. The fourth section discusses the study limitations and recommendations for future research are presented.

Discussion

The main purpose of the dissertation was to explore the role of the local retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework. To achieve this purpose, three objectives guided the research: (1) to understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of Fibershed, and specifically relative to the S2S Framework; (2) to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products; and (3) to explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to help address Fibershed goals for sustainability.

A preliminary study using netnographic observation and in-depth interviews was conducted in Phase I to address the first objective. To address the second objective, an empirical survey-based study was conducted in Phase II. Results from both Phase I and Phase II were used to address objective 3. The following paragraphs present a comprehensive analysis of the findings from Phase I and Phase II of this dissertation. This discussion includes the results of the

preliminary netnographic observation and in-depth interviews, as well as the results of the main empirical survey-based study.

Objective One: Understand Perceptions of and Expectations for Sustainability Among Members of Fibershed

Previous research has indicated that the democratization of fashion, which has made trendy and inexpensive clothing accessible to consumers across all socioeconomic classes, has been a significant factor in the rise of fast fashion (Bick et al., 2018; Fletcher, 2010; Thomas, 2019). The surge in demand for fast fashion has led to the globalization of production centers, with manufacturing shifting to countries offering low costs but often accompanied by poor labor conditions and limited environmental regulations (Bick et al., 2018; Morgan & Birtwistle, 2009). Consequently, this situation has given rise to several challenges both in developed and developing nations, such as economic decline in previously flourishing manufacturing regions, compromised human rights, and environmental degradation (Hodges & Frank, 2013; Thomas, 2019). Initiatives like the slow fashion movement have emerged to counteract these negative impacts. Fibershed, an outgrowth of the slow fashion movement, is an emerging concept aimed at promoting locally-oriented sustainable production and consumption practices (Burgess & White, 2019; Fibershed, n.d.).

To address Objective One, which was to understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of Fibershed, an exploratory investigation was conducted to understand what factors are relevant to Fibershed in terms of local sustainable supply chains. A qualitative approach was adopted for this purpose and conducted in two parts. First, a netnographic observation was conducted to identify relevant stakeholders who are part of the Fibershed S2S Framework. Next, in-depth interviews were conducted with members involved in

the Fibershed movement to understand the structure of the Fibershed network and participants' perceptions about sustainability. Participants' views were gathered on how the Fibershed network facilitates the process of achieving local sustainable supply chains, as well as their perceptions on the role of local retailers within the Fibershed S2S Framework. The results from these in-depth interviews helped inform the identification of factors relevant to the investigation of consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Four main themes emerged during the in-depth interviews that shed light on Fibershed's goals for sustainability: (1) *Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings*, (2) *Community-Centric Sustainability*, (3) *Consumer Awareness*, and (4) *Selling Sustainability*.

The findings from the first theme *Sustainable Fashion – One Concept, Many Meanings*, revealed participants' holistic view of sustainability, encompassing actions that simultaneously benefit the planet, people, and enhance profitability (United Nations, 1987). Central to this view was the farm-forward approach to regional collaboration, where materials are sourced directly from the farmers and producers in the eco-system, establishing relationships as the basis of supply chains and promoting localized manufacturing (Burgess & White, 2019). The findings also revealed the importance of a systems thinking approach, advocating for an economic model that maximized resources efficiently, promoted ethical sourcing practices, and considered the entire life cycle of the product (Cataldi et al., 2010; Fletcher, 2008). Central to the vision of sustainability was the prioritization of eco-friendly practices aimed at the reduction of carbon footprints, upholding fair labor standards and working conditions, and optimizing resource efficiency in the production process (Daniels, 2019; Miller et al., 2022).

Findings from the second theme *Community-Centric Sustainability* revealed that Fibershed's approach to sustainable textile and apparel production is deeply rooted in promoting

a strong sense of community attachment among the different stakeholders in its S2S Framework. Fibershed facilitates activities within specific bioregions that bring together farmers, artisans, manufacturers, and retailers, and help build communities that are interconnected to promote collective action towards shared sustainability goals (Fibershed, n.d.). Furthermore, Fibershed's initiatives regarding cooperative marketing and relationship-building among members strengthen the bonds between the different stakeholders, cultivating a sense of unity and shared purpose. Notably, Fibershed activities contribute to the development of self-reliant local communities and assist in achieving a sense of community pride and attachment (Fibershed, n.d.). Moreover, Fibershed is committed to the principles of social equity, inclusivity, and transparency among its stakeholders and to ensuring that everyone involved has a voice and is valued, further solidifying community bonds and attachment (Burgess & White, 2019).

The analysis of the third theme, *Consumer Awareness*, revealed gaps in consumer knowledge concerning the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production, particularly during the manufacturing phase, including dyeing and waste generation (Ozdamar-Ertekin, 2017). Overconsumption habits and the rapid cycle of clothing purchase and disposal were highlighted as contributors to excessive waste generation, reflecting a societal shift towards a disposable mindset that necessitated addressing end-of-life issues associated with apparel products (Arthur, 2020). Participants expressed concerns about consumers being misled by greenwashing tactics employed by the fashion industry that portray products as sustainable when they may not be genuinely sustainable (Muthu, 2017). Participants also noticed a disconnect between consumers' professed values and their actual consumption behaviors, alluding to factors such as the industry's opaque nature, greenwashing practices, lack of stylish sustainable alternatives, and cost concerns (Connell & Kozar, 2014; Kim & Damhorst, 1998). However, the

findings also revealed that, despite challenges, consumers can also be catalysts for change, drawing parallels to the local food movement's growing influence on collective consciousness regarding the impact of food consumption choices (Fletcher, 2010). The participants believed that consumers had the power to influence manufacturers and retailers to adopt sustainable practices through active feedback, demands for transparency, informed choices, and input into ethical sourcing, transparent labelling, and use of sustainable materials (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021). While acknowledging the difficulty of expecting overnight behavioral changes, participants emphasized the need for incremental shifts, with some noting that a lack of style and fashion in sustainable garments may contribute to consumers' overall reluctance to embrace sustainable alternatives.

The final theme *Selling Sustainability* revealed the role of local retail establishments in fostering a culture of sustainable apparel and fashion consumption through three primary avenues: imparting knowledge, shaping trends, and facilitating access. Participants recognized the potential of these retailers, especially boutique outlets, to enlighten patrons about the origins and composition of natural fibers, as well as the distinctive qualities that ethically-crafted garments possess (Dodds et al. 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020; Zebal & Jackson, 2019). Cooperative marketing initiatives that involve collaborations between artisanal groups and retailers were envisioned as a means of creating perceptions of authenticity, trust, and proximity between producers and consumers (Jung, 2014). The participants all pointed to the multifaceted and influential role that local retail establishments could play in shaping consumer mindsets, disseminating sustainability knowledge, setting sustainable apparel trends, and ultimately fostering a culture of mindful consumption (Jones et al., 2005; Vadakkepatt et al., 2021). In conclusion, local retailers were deemed essential in encouraging sustainable fashion

consumption through education, trendsetting, and providing access to ethically made clothing, including Fibershed affiliated products, ultimately promoting a culture of mindful consumption within the community.

Objective Two: Investigate Consumers' Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

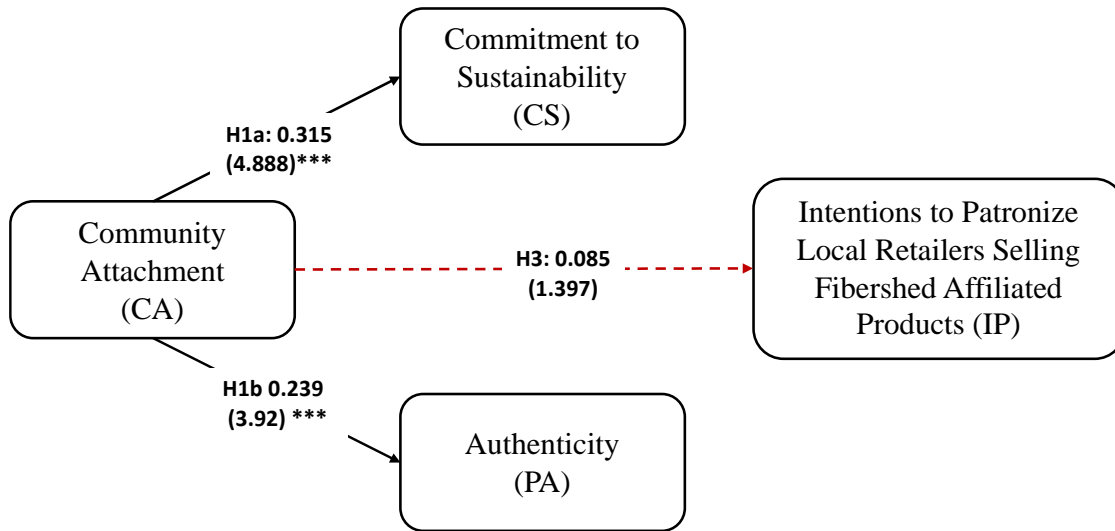
A quantitative approach was used to address Objective Two. The findings of the qualitative study and the literature review discussed in Chapter II helped with the identification of factors that influence consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The conceptual model and related hypotheses were developed and tested using structural equation modeling. The following sections discuss the results of the hypotheses testing.

Relationships between Consumers' Community Attachment and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

Hypotheses 1 proposed that community attachment has a significant, positive relationship with consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (H1a) and authenticity (H1b). Hypotheses 3 proposed that community attachment has a significant, positive relationship with consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Hypotheses 9 proposed that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (H9a) and authenticity (H9b) has a significant relationship with their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. As shown in Figure 24, the hypothesized relationships between community attachment and consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (H1a) and authenticity (H1b) were significant and supported. The relationship between community attachment and consumers' intentions to

patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products was not found to be significant and therefore H3 was not supported. However, as discussed in Chapter 1V, consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity played a significant mediating role in the relationship between community attachment and intentions to patronize local retailers.

Figure 24. Consumers' Community Attachment and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The result of H1a indicated that the path in the structural model between consumers' community attachment and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability was significant ($\gamma = 0.315$, $z = 4.888$, $p < 0.001$). The significant and positive relationship in H1a indicates that consumers' community attachment positively influences their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability. As found in the prior literature, community attachment represents an emotional connection and sense of belonging within one's local community

(Handelman & Bello, 2004; Nasr et al., 2022). This attachment is strengthened by social bonds, local associations, and feelings of amity towards the community (Miller, 2001; Stinner et al., 1990). Results from this dissertation support the notion that individuals with strong community connections tend to view local businesses as more deeply embedded in and committed to the community and to practices that benefit the community (Miller & Besser, 2000; Wilson & Hodges, 2022). Likewise, the results highlight the significance of community attachment in shaping consumers' perceptions of local retailers' sustainability initiatives. Results suggest that consumers with a strong sense of belonging and emotional connections to their community are more likely to perceive local retailers' sustainability initiatives positively (Mauri et al., 2022). This perception may stem from the belief that local retailers, being an integral part of the community, have a special interest in preserving and enhancing the well-being of that community through sustainable practices (Nasr et al., 2022; Wilson, 2016).

H1b posited that consumer values related to community attachment have a positive effect on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity. This relationship was supported by the significant and positive result of H1b, which indicated that the path between consumers' community attachment and their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity was significant ($\gamma = 0.239$, $z\text{-value} = 3.920$, $p < 0.001$). Prior research has found that perceptions of authenticity stem from factors like traditions, commitment to quality, heritage, legitimacy, and connections to the local area (Beverland, 2005; Bruhn et al., 2012; Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022). Consumers with strong emotional bonds and sense of belonging within their local community may perceive that those local retailers, embodying similar qualities, are more likely to be authentic in their business operations. When local retailers emphasize genuineness, reliability, originality, heritage, tradition, and localness in their offerings and brand storytelling (Jung, 2014; Ram et al., 2016), it

aligns with the authenticity that consumers who are attached to their community respect and wish to support. Thus, consumers are more likely to perceive local retailers who respect and preserve those characteristics as authentic (Chhabra, 2005).

Interestingly, H3, which proposed a direct, positive relationship between community attachment and intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products was not supported by the results ($\gamma = 0.085$, $z\text{-value} = 1.397$, $p > 0.05$). While previous studies have linked community attachment to increased loyalty and patronage (Cowell, 1994; Skippari et al., 2017; Wilson 2018), the lack of a significant direct effect found by this dissertation suggests that the relationship between consumers' community attachment and patronage intentions may be more complex. This notion aligns with the proposition that consumer behavior is embedded within broader contexts (Jackson, 2005), where community attachment represents one of several key contextual factors that contribute to their perceptions of local retailers, and, in turn, their patronage intentions.

This result might also be explained by the presence of existing shopping habits and preferences within the consumer's local community. That is, if consumers already have a strong attachment to their community, they may have established relationships with local stores and retailers that they have been patronizing for a long time. These existing shopping habits and networks could make it challenging for them to consider switching to or incorporating new local retailers, even if those retailers are selling Fibershed affiliated products that align with their values of sustainability and supporting local businesses. In other words, the strong community attachment could paradoxically lead to a resistance or hesitation about changing their established shopping patterns and adopting new retailers, even if those new retailers are also locally-based and offer sustainable products. Consumers may perceive their existing local retailers as being

part of their community identity and network, making it difficult to shift their intentions and behaviors towards new alternatives.

This particular unexpected result could also be attributed to the fact that community attachment encompasses various aspects, such as social ties, familiarity, and a sense of belonging. While consumers may feel attached to their local community, their specific shopping habits and preferences may be influenced by other factors, such as convenience, familiarity with existing retailers, or a perceived lack of differentiation between the new and existing local retailers. Additionally, the introduction of new local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products may be perceived as a disruption of or change to the established local retail landscape, which could potentially create resistance or hesitation among consumers who are deeply attached to their community's existing retail environment. Notably, this result is also similar to that of Miller (2001), where the direct relationship between community attachment and patronage behavior was non-significant, but the indirect relationship was significant. Moreover, those studies that have suggested positive correlations between community attachment and patronage intentions could have considered different factors than those in this dissertation, such as household composition, community characteristics, and different types of consumption (Cowell, 1995; Jackson, 2005).

The results showed that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity mediated the relationship between community attachment and consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. In testing the mediating effects, the impact of community attachment on perceived authenticity (CA- PA – IP indirect effect = 0.051, $p < 0.01$) was found to be significant, whereas commitment to sustainability (CA- CS – IP indirect effect = 0.039, $p > 0.05$) was not. However, the total indirect

effect (CA - CS / PA – IP = 0.090, $p < 0.001$), as well as the total effect (CA - CS / PA – IP = 0.175, $p < 0.05$) of the mediation of commitment to sustainability and authenticity between community attachment and intention to patronize local retailers was significant. This result supports the notion that consumers who are attached to their community may first cultivate beliefs and perceptions about local businesses, which then guides their intentions to patronize them. As discussed by Miller (2001), consumers with higher levels of community attachment tend to exhibit increased reciprocity and cooperation within their community, influencing their preferences for shopping at local retailers. Community attachment also plays an important role in shaping individuals' choices, spending patterns and patronage behaviors (Handelman & Bello, 2004). Furthermore, the significance of authenticity as a mediator is consistent with the findings of Chhabra (2005) and Jung (2014), both of whom highlighted the importance of authenticity in building trust and differentiating local retailers from competitors.

The literature suggests that consumers who value artisan-made clothing and traditional techniques tend to trust authentic retailers, as these retailers offer unique narratives and exclusive products which help them stand out in the market (Jung, 2014). However, the non-significant mediation effect of perceived commitment to sustainability is somewhat unexpected, given the emphasis on sustainability within the Fibershed movement (Burgess & White, 2019) and the growing consumer demand for environmentally responsible fashion (Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that consumer attachment shapes consumers' decision making, favoring local retailers who are engaged with their community and are authentic in their interactions with consumers (Cowell, 1994; Wilson & Hodges, 2022). This finding suggests that, in the context of community attachment, authenticity may play a more crucial role than sustainability commitment in shaping consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers.

Nevertheless, results underscore the overall importance of these perceptions in the relationship between community attachment and intention to patronize local retailers.

To better understand and address the unexpected finding of the non-significant direct relationship between consumers' community attachment and their intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, further research could explore the specific reasons behind consumers' resistance or hesitation to adopt new local retailers, even when those retailers align with their values of sustainability and supporting local businesses. Qualitative approaches, such as focus groups or in-depth interviews, could provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between community attachment, existing shopping habits, and the perceived barriers or motivations for adopting new local retailers. By gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics, initiatives promoting Fibershed affiliated products and local retailers could be tailored to address consumers' concerns, emphasize the unique value propositions of these retailers, and potentially leverage existing community networks and social ties to facilitate the adoption of these new sustainable shopping options.

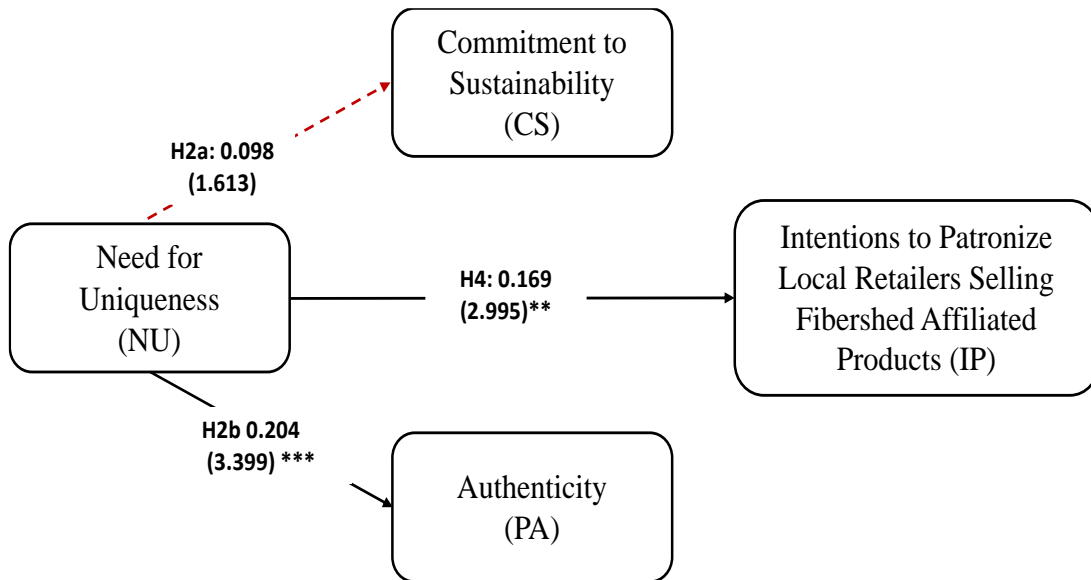
Relationships between Consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

This study investigated the relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness, their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The findings provide valuable insights into how consumers' values and perceptions influence their behavioral intentions in the context of sustainable apparel consumption. As shown in Figure 25, three hypotheses related to the positive impact of need for uniqueness on consumers' perceptions of local retailers and their intentions to patronize these retailers were tested: the impact of need for uniqueness on their

perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability (H2a); the impact of need for uniqueness on their perceptions of retailers' authenticity (H2b); and the impact of need for uniqueness on consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (H4).

H2a posited that consumers who value uniqueness perceive retailers committed to sustainability initiatives positively. However, the result of H2a showed a non-significant relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability ($\gamma = 0.098$, $z\text{-value} = 1.613$, $p > 0.05$). This finding suggests that consumers' need for uniqueness through acquiring sustainable products does not necessarily translate into a perception of retailers as being more committed to sustainable practices. One possible explanation for this result is that consumers with a need for uniqueness may be skeptical of retailers' sustainability claims, particularly given the increasing prevalence of greenwashing and irresponsible corporate behaviors (Hofenk et al., 2019). It might also be that consumers with a high need for uniqueness approach sustainable fashion in a superficial manner, viewing it more as a trendy statement rather than a genuine commitment to sustainability, and therefore may not perceive retailers' sustainable commitment favorably (Dabija & Băbuț, 2019). Additionally, extant research has found that the pursuit of individual distinctiveness can pose sustainability challenges, especially by fostering unsustainable consumption (Bhaduri & Stanforth, 2016; Lang & Armstrong, 2018). Therefore, consumers who value uniqueness may not perceive retailers who are committed to sustainable practices favorably.

Figure 25. Consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant, and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

However, H2b, which posited that consumers who value uniqueness perceive retailers' authenticity positively, was supported. The result of H2a affirmed this idea, as the relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness and their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity was found to be significant ($\gamma = 0.204$, $z\text{-value} = 3.399$, $p < 0.001$). This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that consumers with a high need for uniqueness are drawn to products and experiences that are perceived as genuine, original, and distinctive, and that they perceive local retailers who sell these products as unique (Zebal & Jackson, 2019). As discussed previously, consumers that value artisan-made clothing and traditional techniques tend to see these products as unique, as they offer individualized and exclusive narratives which help them

stand out in the market (Cervellon et al., 2012; Jung, 2014). Likewise, consumers who value uniqueness in authentic products may value the originality and distinctiveness of local retailers and perceive such retailers as authentic. In the context of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, the unique and locally-sourced nature of these offerings may appeal to consumers seeking to express their individuality and to avoid mass-produced, conventional fashion items.

Furthermore, H4, which proposed that consumers' need for uniqueness has a positive relationship with their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, was supported. This result indicates that consumers' need for uniqueness has a significant, positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products ($\gamma = 0.169$, $z\text{-value} = 2.995$, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that consumers with a high need for uniqueness are more likely to seek out and purchase products from local retailers that offer distinctive, sustainably-produced apparel, which aligns with previous research that has found a positive relationship between need for uniqueness and intentions to purchase sustainable or eco-friendly fashion products (Gam, 2011; Lang & Armstrong, 2018). Moreover, as local retailers generally cater to specific needs and preferences of their target consumers within the community, it follows that consumers who value uniqueness are more likely to patronize local retailers that will cater to their particular needs (Nobel et al., 2006).

In addition to the hypothesized relationships, the analysis also revealed that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between need for uniqueness and intention to patronize local retailers. The significant, indirect path with perceived authenticity as a mediator between need for uniqueness and intention to patronize local retailers ((NU – PA – IP indirect effect = 0.043, $p < 0.05$) suggests that consumers with a higher need for uniqueness perceive local

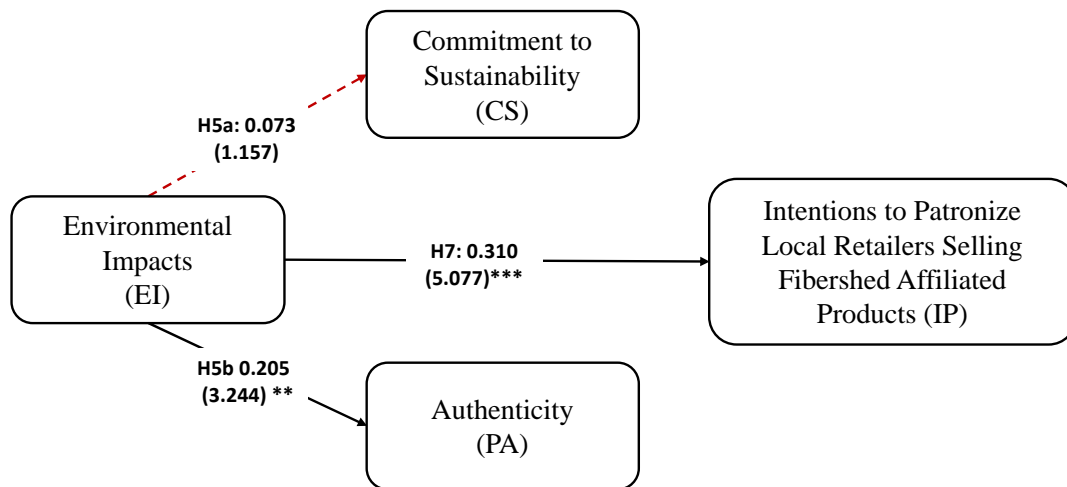
retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as more authentic, which, in turn, likely leads to a greater intention to patronize these retailers. The significant effect indicates that need for uniqueness also has a direct influence on intention to patronize local retailers (NU – IP direct effect = 0.169, $p < 0.05$), independent of the mediating effect of perceived authenticity. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that consumers with a high need for uniqueness actively seek out and purchase products that differentiate them from others (Tian et al., 2001). The partial mediation effect of perceived authenticity highlights the complex nature of the relationship between need for uniqueness and intention to patronize local retailers. While perceptions of authenticity do play a role in explaining this relationship, need for uniqueness also has a direct influence on patronage intentions that is not fully accounted for by perceptions of authenticity. Given the significant result of the total effect between need for uniqueness and intention to patronize local retailers (NU – IP total effect = 0.224, $p < 0.01$), the finding suggests that consumers' decisions to patronize local retailers selling sustainable fashion products are driven by a combination of their desire for uniqueness, their perceptions of retailer authenticity, and potentially other factors not captured in the current study (Andrei et al., 2017).

In conclusion, consumers who look for products that reflect their individuality and personal values may patronize local retailers that can fulfil these needs by offering distinctive and customized Fibershed merchandise that is unique, authentic, and could be tailored to consumer preferences. This idea is in line with previous studies that have established relationships between different consumer values, perceptions, and behavioral intentions (Diddi & Niehm; 2016; Lundblad & Davies, 2016). The next section discusses the results of the proposed relationships between consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production and their perceptions and behavioral intentions.

Relationships between Consumers' Awareness of the Environmental Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

This dissertation investigated the relationships between consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production, their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. As shown in Figure 26, the study tested three hypotheses related to the positive impact of consumers' environmental awareness: the effect of consumers' awareness of environmental impacts of textile and apparel production on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (H5a); the effect of consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity (H5b); and the effect of consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (H7).

Figure 26. Consumers' Awareness of the Environmental Impacts and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

H5a posited that consumers who are aware of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production perceive retailers that are committed to sustainability initiatives positively. However, the non-significant result of the path between consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability ($\gamma = 0.073$, $z = 1.157$, $p > 0.05$), indicated that consumers' awareness of the environmental impact of apparel and textile production alone may not be sufficient to shape their perceptions of retailers' sustainability commitment. One possible explanation for this result is that consumers may view sustainability as a complex and multifaceted concept that encompasses not only environmental considerations but also social and economic dimensions (Andrei et al., 2017; Kautish & Khare, 2022; Sivapalan et al., 2021). As such, consumers' perceptions of retailers' sustainability commitment may be influenced by a broader range of factors beyond just environmental impact, such as retailers' communication of their sustainable initiatives, third-party certifications, evidence of ethical labor practices, or CSR initiatives (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Muthu, 2017). It may also be possible that consumers' awareness of environmental issues may not always align with their actual consumption behaviors due to factors such as information overload, greenwashing, skepticism towards sustainability claims, or competing priorities like price and convenience (Connell & Kozar, 2014; Kim & Damhorst, 1998; Muthu, 2017).

H5b posited that consumers who are aware of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production perceive retailers' authenticity positively. The result of H5b affirmed this

notion, as the relationship between consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production and their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity was found to be significant ($\gamma = 0.205$, z -value = 3.244, $p < 0.01$). This finding aligns with the existing literature, which suggests that consumers who are aware of environmental issues are more likely to perceive businesses that prioritize sustainability and make it their core business consideration as authentic and therefore genuine in their commitment to environmental responsibility (Kennedy et al., 2016). Moreover, when a retailer communicates and implements a well-defined strategic approach to sustainability, it is perceived to be more authentic and, in turn, more likely to engender consumers' trust (Kennedy et al., 2016). In the context of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, consumers' recognition of the environmental benefits of these sustainably-produced offerings may enhance their perceptions of the retailers' authenticity.

Furthermore, H7, which proposed that consumers' awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production will have a positive impact on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, was supported. This result indicates that consumers' awareness of environmental impacts has a significant, positive effect on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products ($\gamma = 0.310$, z -value = 5.077, $p < 0.001$). This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the influence of environmental awareness on consumers' behavioral intentions (Gam, 2011; Sivapalan, 2021). As consumers become more mindful of the environmental consequences of their apparel consumption choices, they increasingly look for alternatives that align with their values and mitigate the negative impacts of the industry (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Gam, 2011; Santos-Corrada et al., 2023). Consequently, they may be more likely to patronize local retailers selling sustainably produced fashion items, such as those affiliated with Fibershed. This relationship

underscores the importance of education and awareness-raising initiatives in driving sustainable consumption practices (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Kozar & Connell, 2013). By providing consumers with information about the environmental impact of their fashion choices and highlighting the benefits of sustainable alternatives, such as Fibershed affiliated products, local retailers can capitalize on this growing market of environmentally conscious consumers and foster a more sustainable fashion ecosystem.

Additionally, as in the case of need for uniqueness, the analysis revealed that perceived authenticity partially mediates the relationship between awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production and intention to patronize local retailers. The significant, indirect path with perceived authenticity as a mediator between awareness of the environmental impacts and intention to patronize local retailers (EI – PA – IP indirect effect = 0.043, $p < 0.01$) suggests that environmental awareness affects consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers in part through its impact on perceptions of retailer authenticity. This finding aligns with the existing literature, which emphasizes the importance of authenticity in driving consumer preferences for sustainable fashion (Chhabra, 2005; Jung, 2014). However, the significant, direct path between environmental impact and intention to patronize local retailers (EI – IP direct effect = 0.310, $p < 0.001$) indicates that environmental awareness also has a direct influence on patronage intentions, independent of the mediating effect of perceived authenticity (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Kozar & Connell, 2013; Santos - Corrada et al., 2023). As results of the total effect between environmental impact and intention to patronize local retailers were significant (EI – IP total effect = 0.363, $p < 0.001$), results indicate that consumers' intentions to support local retailers selling sustainable fashion products are driven by a combination of their environmental concerns,

their perceptions of retailer authenticity, and potentially other factors not captured in the current study, such as social norms (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Santos - Corrada et al., 2023).

To conclude, by understanding the role of environmental awareness in shaping consumer attitudes and behaviors, local retailers can develop targeted strategies to attract and retain environmentally conscious customers. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of collaboration and transparency in driving sustainable apparel and textile consumption, as initiatives like Fibershed can help local retailers meet the growing demand for environmentally responsible fashion choices. The next section discusses the results of the relationships proposed between consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production and their perceptions and behavioral intentions.

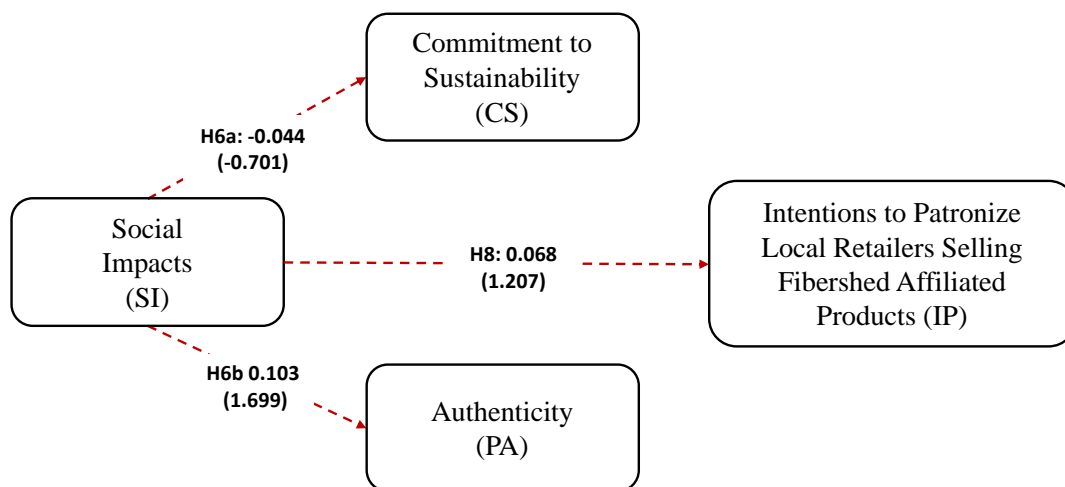
Relationships between Consumers' Awareness of the Social Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

This dissertation investigated proposed relationships between consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production, their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. As shown in Figure 27, the study tested three hypotheses related to the positive impact of consumers' social awareness – the effect of consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability (H6a); the effect of consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity (H6b); and the effect of consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel

production on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (H8).

H6a posited that consumers who are aware of the social impacts of textile and apparel production perceive retailers that are committed to sustainability initiatives positively. However, results of H6a indicated that the path in the structural model between consumers' awareness of the social impacts of textile and apparel production and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability was non-significant ($\gamma = -0.044, z = -0.701, p > 0.05$). H6b posited that consumers who are aware of the social impacts of textile and apparel production perceive local retailers' authenticity positively, and similar to H6a, the relationship was found to be non-significant ($\gamma = 0.103, z = 1.699, p > 0.05$). Lastly, H8, which stated that consumers who are aware of the social impacts of textile and apparel production have positive intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, was also not supported, with the results being non-significant ($\gamma = 0.068, z = 1.207, p > 0.05$).

Figure 27. Consumers' Awareness of the Social Impacts and Their Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

These findings suggest that consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production, such as poor working conditions, low wages, and human rights abuses in global supply chains (Dickson et al., 2009), does not directly influence their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability or authenticity, nor does it directly impact their intentions to patronize these retailers. This finding is somewhat surprising, given the emphasis on social responsibility and ethical practices within the sustainable fashion consumption movement and the growing consumer demand for socially responsible fashion (Cowan & Kinley, 2014; Fletcher, 2018; Kim & Damhorst, 1998; Lundblad & Davies, 2016). However, prior studies have reported similar results, where social awareness does not necessarily engender positive perceptions of or behavioral intentions towards sustainable products on the part of consumers (Diddi & Niehm, 2016).

One explanation for this result may be that even though consumers are aware of social issues, this awareness may not always translate to positive attitudes, perceptions, or behaviors, because other factors like price, quality, and style considerations may be more important (Dickson, 1999; Kim & Damhorst, 1998). This finding aligns with the well-documented "value-action gap" in sustainable consumption research (Campbell et al., 2023; Goworek et al., 2012; Youn et al., 2017), where consumers might express concern for social justice issues, but other factors would be more likely to dominate their purchase decisions, including within the context of Fibershed retailers.

Another possible explanation for this result is that consumers may prioritize environmental sustainability over social responsibility when evaluating local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity. The existing literature suggests that environmental concerns have become more salient in recent years, with consumers increasingly focusing on issues such as climate change, resource depletion, and waste reduction (Kozar & Connell, 2013; Santos-Corrada et al., 2023). In contrast, social impact issues, while important, may be less obvious or immediate in consumers' minds when assessing local retailers' sustainability practices (Dickson, 1999). Furthermore, consumers' lack of detailed knowledge about the social impacts of apparel and textile production, and the difficulty of assessing retailers' social responsibility practices when compared to environmental issues may have contributed to the non-significant results (Hofenk et al., 2019; Kozar & Connell, 2013). Unlike environmental sustainability, which can be more easily communicated through certifications, eco-labels, or product attributes, social responsibility practices may be less tangible and therefore more challenging for consumers to evaluate (Goworek, 2011).

In addition, the results could stem from the context of this dissertation related to Fibershed affiliated products. It is possible that Fibershed's focus on local production systems may have led respondents to prioritize environmental benefits, thereby potentially overshadowing social concerns. Furthermore, respondents may not have had a clear understanding of what it means for a retailer to be affiliated with the Fibershed movement or the specific social impact initiatives associated with it. Without a clear understanding of how Fibershed helps address the of social impacts, their awareness may not have influenced their perceptions of or intentions towards patronizing these retailers. Furthermore, a local retailer's commitment to addressing social impacts can be complex and multifaceted, involving various

aspects of their supply chain and business practices. Respondents may have found it challenging to translate their awareness of the social impacts of production into specific perceptions or intentions towards local retailers. There is also a possibility that the study may have been conducted in a context where environmental sustainability or other sustainability concerns were more pressing or salient than social impact issues. In such cases, respondents' awareness of social impacts may have taken on less importance compared to other sustainability considerations when they evaluated local retailers. Moreover, respondents may have been sceptical or distrustful of the claims regarding local retailers and their social responsibility practices via a Fibershed affiliation. This lack of trust may have prevented their social impact awareness from positively influencing their perceptions and intentions.

The characteristics of the sample population used in the study may have also played a role in the observed results. If the sample was not representative of the target population or consisted of individuals who were not particularly engaged with sustainable fashion or local retailing, their awareness of social impacts may not have translated into positive perceptions or intentions towards local retailers. It is also possible that the results may not be generalizable to the entire population, and a subgroup analysis based on sample characteristics like age, gender, state of residence, community characteristics, and/or political affiliation might yield different results. Finally, potential issues with the survey instrument could have contributed to the non-significant relationship between consumer awareness of social impacts and their perceptions and intentions towards local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Issues could include a lack of specific context connecting the general awareness statements to the local retailers and the Fibershed affiliation, negative phrasing of all awareness items (potentially priming critical views of all apparel manufacturers including manufacturers who are sustainable in their operations), a

limited scope (focusing only on working conditions rather than a broader range of social impact issues), and a generalizability issue by referring to "apparel manufacturers" without distinguishing large global companies from local sustainable producers/retailers.

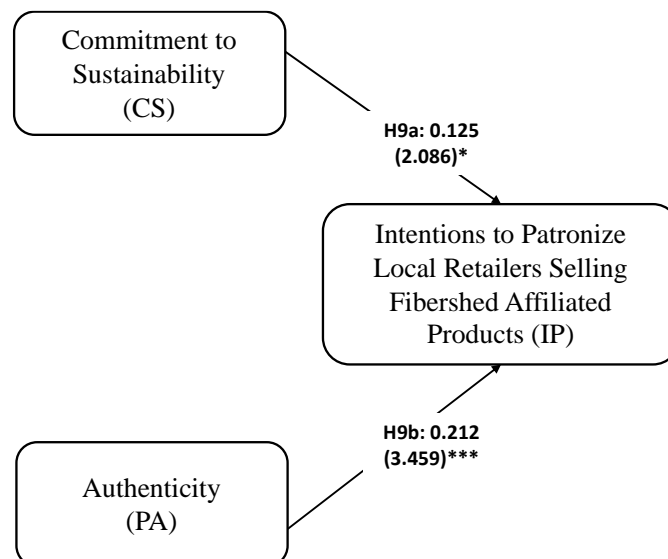
It is important to note, however, that the lack of significance does not necessarily mean that social impact awareness is irrelevant in the context of sustainable fashion. Previous research has shown that consumers' awareness of social issues can indirectly influence their attitudes and behaviors through mediating factors such as trust, perceived value, or emotional attachment (Hustvedt & Dickson, 2009; Sanchez-Gonzales et al., 2020). Results highlight the need for further research to investigate the complex relationships between awareness of social impact, consumer perceptions, and intentions in the sustainable apparel context (Lundblad & Davies, 2016). The next section discusses the results of the proposed relationship between consumers' perceptions of local retailers and their intentions to patronize those selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Relationship between Consumers' Perceptions of Local Retailers and Their Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

This dissertation investigated the relationship between consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity and their intentions to patronize those selling Fibershed affiliated products. As shown in Figure 28, the study tested two hypotheses related to the positive impact of consumers' perceptions: the effect of consumers' perceptions of retailers' commitment to sustainability on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (H9a); and the effect of consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (H9b).

H9a posited that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Similarly, H9b posited that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity have a positive impact on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. In line with these hypotheses, the result of H9a indicated that the path in the structural model between consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and their intentions to patronize local retailers was significant ($\beta = 0.125$, z-value = 2.086, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, the result of H9b indicated that the path between consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intention to patronize local retailers was significant ($\beta = 0.212$, z-value = 3.459, $p < 0.001$), thereby establishing a positive relationship between consumers' perceptions and their behavioral intentions, which aligns with findings in the extant literature (Connell, 2011; Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Mauri et al., 2022).

Figure 28. Consumers' Perceptions of and Intentions to Patronize Local Retailers



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The significance of H9a underscores the importance of local retailers' commitment to sustainability in shaping consumers' intentions to patronize them. As previous research highlights, consumers' expectations that retailers engage in sustainable practices have led to more sustainable product offerings and strengthened consumer-retailer relationships (Mauri et al., 2022). Per the extant literature, retailers engaging in sustainable practices, such as responsible procurement, product reuse, recycling, and transparent communication of sustainability initiatives (Sánchez-González et al., 2020) are viewed favorably by consumers and therefore they can benefit from increased store equity, loyalty, word-of-mouth recommendations, even leading to increased profits and a competitive advantage (Jones et al., 2005; Lehner, 2015; Youn et al., 2017). Furthermore, as consumers increasingly value sustainability, they demonstrate a willingness to pay higher prices for sustainable products and to patronize retailers aligned with their sustainability values (Kim et al., 2015; Kozar & Connell, 2013). This shift underscores the relevance of consumer perceptions, compelling retailers to adopt strategies that include sustainable practices to satisfy consumer demands and ultimately to remain competitive (Mauri et al., 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020).

The significant relationship between consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intention to patronize those selling Fibershed affiliated products (H9b) aligns with the existing literature that emphasizes the importance of authenticity in influencing consumer trust and loyalty. This emphasis on authenticity empowers retailers to establish genuine connections with consumers and compete effectively with larger corporations by

resonating more deeply with those consumers seeking authentic experiences in an increasingly competitive retail environment (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Jung, 2014). Prior studies have found that perceived authenticity associated with community engagement, sustainability, and local community development influences consumers' empathy, loyalty, and trust towards local retailers, as consumers believe that these retailers accommodate their pursuit of genuine and traditional experiences (Handler, 1986; Kennedy et al., 2016; Wilson & Hodges, 2022).

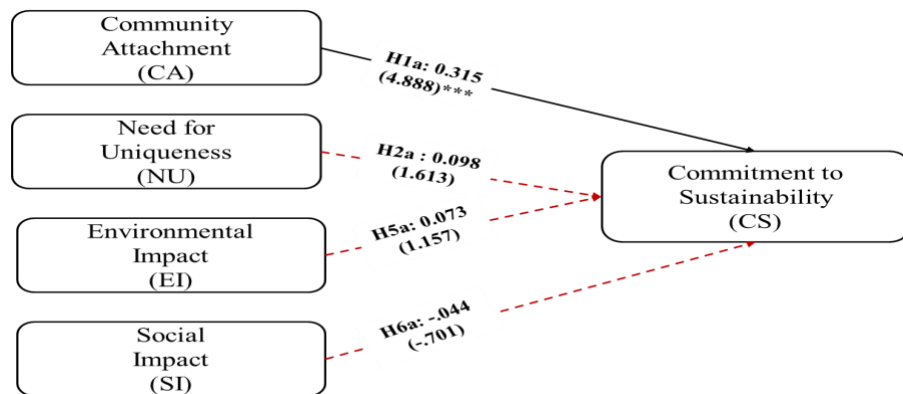
In the context of the Fibershed movement, the emphasis on sustainable production practices, regional sourcing, local manufacturing, and traditional craftsmanship aligns closely with the concept of authenticity and sustainability in retailing (Jung, 2014; Trejo et al., 2019). Fibershed characterizes sustainability and authenticity by reducing the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production, and prioritizing genuine, transparent practices, valuing traditional craftsmanship, and honoring unique garment production (Burgess & White, 2019).

Relationships between Consumers' Community Attachment, Need for Uniqueness, Awareness of the Environmental and Social Impacts of Textile and Apparel Production, and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability

As previously stated, H2a, which posited that consumers who value uniqueness perceive retailers committed to sustainability initiatives positively, resulted in a non-significant relationship between consumers' need for uniqueness and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability ($\gamma = 0.098$, z -value = 1.613, $p > 0.05$). H5a, which posited that consumers who are aware of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production perceive retailers that are committed to sustainability initiatives positively, resulted in a non-significant relationship ($\gamma = 0.073$, $z = 1.157$, $p > 0.05$). Similarly H6a, which posited that consumers who are aware of the social impacts of textile and apparel production perceive

retailers that are committed to sustainability initiatives positively also resulted in a non-significant relationship ($\gamma = -0.044, z = -0.701, p > 0.05$). H1a, which posited that consumers who are attached to their community perceive retailers committed to sustainability initiatives positively, was the only relationship that was found to be significant, with a positive relationship between consumers' community attachment and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability ($\gamma = 0.315, z = 4.888, p < 0.001$). However, during the mediation analysis, the relationship between consumers' community attachment and their intention to patronize local retailers as mediated by their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability was found to be non-significant (CA – CS – IP = 0.039, $p > 0.05$), even though the paths CA to CS (H1a) and CS to IP (H9a) were significant and supported in the main structural model analysis. Figure 2 shows the results of the hypotheses in relation to consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability.

Figure 29. Consumers' Values, Awareness, and Their Perceptions of Local Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability



Note. Solid lines indicate that the path coefficients are significant and the hypotheses were supported. Dotted lines indicate non-significant relationships.

p-value (two-tailed): * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Given that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability were non-significant for indicators (need for uniqueness, awareness of environmental impacts, awareness of social impacts, and community attachment) during the mediation analysis, a reexamination of the results is warranted to uncover potential reasons why these factors did not significantly influence respondents' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability when selling Fibershed affiliated products. The non-significant relationships that were found challenge some of the initial assumptions and theoretical underpinnings upon which the hypotheses were based. A comprehensive analysis of these results can shed light on the potential limitations or gaps within the existing theoretical framework, the contextual considerations, and the methodologies used. Moreover, doing so provides insights for refining and/or expanding the approaches used to study sustainable consumption practices, as well as provide guidance for practical implications and future research directions.

The non-significant relationships found between consumers' need for uniqueness, awareness of environmental and social impacts, and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability suggest that these factors alone may not be sufficient in shaping consumers' perceptions of the sustainability efforts of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. While these elements were hypothesized to influence consumers' perceptions, the results indicate that the interplay of factors contributing to these perceptions is more complex than initially assumed. It may be possible that factors such as retailers' specific sustainability initiatives, communication strategies, branding, or the overall shopping experience, may have a more direct influence on how consumers perceive a retailer's commitment to sustainability.

Within the context of this dissertation, which examined the potential for local retailers to promote sustainable apparel consumption through the lens of Social Practice Theory (SPT), these

non-significant relationships highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected elements that shape consumer perceptions and intentions. According to SPT, practices emerge from the dynamic interplay of materials, competences, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012). The non-significant relationships suggest that individual factors, such as need for uniqueness or awareness of environmental and social impacts, may not directly translate into specific perceptions or intentions related to patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Instead, consumer perceptions and intentions may be influenced by a more complex combination of materials, competences, and meanings that were not fully captured in the current study.

For instance, while consumers may have a general need for uniqueness or awareness of sustainability issues, their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability may be shaped by more tangible and visible aspects of local retailers' practices, such as their sourcing of environmentally-friendly materials, involvement in local communities, or implementation of sustainable initiatives within the retail environment. Unless these aspects are clearly communicated and reinforced, individual factors like need for uniqueness or awareness of environmental and social impacts may not directly affect consumer perceptions.

Additionally, the non-significant indirect path from community attachment to intention to patronize local retailers through perceptions of sustainability commitment suggests that the relationships between these elements may be more complex than a simple mediating effect. Other factors, such as the availability and accessibility of Fibershed affiliated products, the competences and skills required to engage in sustainable consumption practices, or the cultural meanings and values associated with these practices, may play more critical roles in shaping consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products.

These results highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to consumer perceptions and intentions within the context of sustainable apparel consumption. Future research could explore additional variables, such as retailers' communication strategies, product attributes, consumer motivations, and the overall shopping experience, to gain a more holistic understanding of the drivers that shape consumer perceptions and intentions related to patronizing local retailers selling sustainable apparel products like Fibershed affiliated products. By revealing additional complexities relative to consumer perceptions and intentions, results of this dissertation contribute to the development of more effective strategies for promoting sustainable consumption practices and supporting local retailers engaged in selling sustainable products.

In conclusion, consumers who are attached to their community, value uniqueness, and care about environmental issues are more likely to look for sustainable offerings, and therefore, are more likely to support retailers that they perceive as authentic and genuinely committed to sustainable practices (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022; Gam, 2011; Kozar & Connell, 2013; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). The hypotheses supported by the data and the positive and significant relationships between several of the variables provide valuable insights into the relationships between consumers' values, perceptions of local retailers, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. Ultimately, findings suggest that consumers' attachment to their community and their desire for distinctive, ethically-crafted products are influential in shaping their intentions to support local retailers committed to sustainable practices, including selling Fibershed affiliated products.

Applying Social Practice Theory

To fully understand the implications of the study's findings and their relevance for Fibershed, the results were examined relative to Social Practice Theory (SPT). As discussed in Chapter II, SPT offers a comprehensive framework for examining how sustainable consumption practices, such as the practice of sustainable apparel consumption can be formed and sustained through the dynamic interconnections between materials, competences, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012).

Initially, this dissertation explored the intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as a potential practice in itself (see Figure 11, page 92), examining the interconnected elements of materials, competences, and meanings that could contribute to it as a practice. However, in considering of the results relative to the principles of Social Practice Theory, it becomes apparent that framing this intention as a distinct practice may oversimplify the complex dynamics involved.

SPT emphasizes the interconnectedness and fluidity of the elements that constitute practices, recognizing that practices are not static or compartmentalized, but, rather, emerge from the dynamic interplay of materials, competences, and meanings (Shove et al., 2012). In this context, the intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products may be more accurately understood as a meaning that is deeply intertwined with and contributes to the broader practices of sustainable apparel consumption. Conceptualizing the intention as a meaning acknowledges that this intention is not an isolated or distinct practice, but instead, is a symbolic aspiration or motivating factor that guides and shapes the overarching practices of sustainable apparel consumption. This meaning intersects and interacts with other meanings, materials, and competences that collectively constitute these broader practices. For instance, the

intention to patronize Fibershed-affiliated local retailers can be viewed as a specific manifestation or expression of broader meanings associated with sustainable consumption, such as a desire for environmental sustainability, support for local economies and local businesses, appreciation for unique and authentic products, and a commitment to ethical production practices. This intention, as a meaning, is bound up with and contributes to the larger set of meanings that shape sustainable apparel consumption.

Furthermore, the local retailer was initially framed as part of the "materials" component within Social Practice Theory. This categorization was based on the understanding that local retailers provide the physical retail environment that provides access to Fibershed affiliated products, which could be considered a material resource necessary for the practice. While this framing provided a useful starting point, further consideration revealed the need for a more nuanced understanding of the role of local retailers in the broader practice of sustainable apparel consumption practices. Upon deeper examination of the results through the lens of Social Practice Theory, it becomes apparent that local retailers play a more multifaceted role that extends beyond that of just materials.

Local retailers are not static objects or infrastructures, but active entities that contribute to shaping the broader practice of sustainable apparel consumption in various ways. Local retailers not only provide access to sustainable products (materials) but also play a crucial role in building consumer competences through education and awareness-raising efforts. Additionally, local retailers can actively shape and reinforce the cultural meanings associated with sustainable consumption, such as supporting local economies, enhancing community attachment, and facilitating appreciation for unique and authentic products. Furthermore, local retailers may have their own set of practices, competences, and meanings related to sourcing, stocking, and

promoting Fibershed affiliated products, which could interact with and influence the broader practice of sustainable apparel consumption or sustainable supply chain practices. By recognizing the multifaceted role of local retailers and their influence on materials, competences, and meanings, a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective of their significance can be developed within the broader practice of sustainable apparel consumption.

By adopting these revised perspectives, a more nuanced and holistic understanding of how the intention to patronize Fibershed-affiliated local retailers meaningfully interacts with and reinforces the various elements that collectively constitute the broader practices of sustainable apparel consumption can be developed. This view aligns with SPT's emphasis on the interconnectedness and dynamic nature of practices, recognizing that practices are not static or compartmentalized, but rather, they emerge from the complex interplay of multiple factors. Applying SPT to help interpret the results offers a deeper understanding of how local retailers can play a role in promoting locally produced sustainable apparel within the broader sustainability goals of Fibershed and the practices of sustainable apparel consumption.

Based on Phase I and Phase II findings, the elements of materials, meanings, and competences are discussed in the context of the broader practices of sustainable apparel consumption, with the intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products being conceptualized as a meaning that contributes to these practices. First, materials refer to the physical objects, technologies, and infrastructure that enable and sustain a practice (Shove et al., 2012). In this case, the key materials include access to sustainable products through local retailers, Fibershed affiliated products (which are produced using sustainable practices, natural fibers, and localized manufacturing), and the broader infrastructure of the Fibershed movement, such as the networks and partnerships that support sustainable fashion production and

consumption. The results of Phase I explain the significance of local retailers in providing access to sustainable, locally-produced garments (i.e., Fibershed products) and the results of Phase II suggest the potential for these materials to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors. Results of Phase II also explain the effect of consumers' desire for unique, locally-and sustainably-produced items on their intentions to support retailers that sell sustainably manufactured products and employ sustainable supply chain sourcing and manufacturing practices. Specifically, the support for H4, H7, H9a, and H9b provides empirical evidence that consumers' need for uniqueness, their awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production, and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity influence their intentions to patronize these retailers when the materials are available. Findings provide further support for the notion that consumers' values, awareness, and perceptions can have a significant impact on their intention to patronize local retailers, highlighting the importance of the material elements within the practice.

Competences involve the skills, knowledge, and understanding required to engage in the practice (Shove et al., 2012). For the purpose of this dissertation, competences included consumers' awareness and understanding of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production practices, including their capacity to make informed decisions about sustainable consumption. Findings of the preliminary qualitative study underscore the role of local retailers in consumer education by providing information about the unique and sustainable qualities of Fibershed affiliated products, thereby assisting in developing competences necessary for the practice. Findings from the main study, specifically H5b and H7, show that consumer awareness of the environmental impacts shapes not only their perceptions of local retailers'

authenticity, but also their intentions to patronize these retailers, further emphasizing the importance of competences in the formation of sustainable apparel consumption as a practice.

Meanings pertain to the symbolic significance and cultural conventions associated with a practice (Shove et al., 2012). In this study, meanings encompassed consumers' values of community attachment, their desire for uniqueness, their view of local retailers' sustainability commitment and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The qualitative preliminary study revealed that participants value local community involvement and partnerships, suggesting that these shared meanings, shaped by social institutions and shared values within the Fibershed community, are vital. Additionally, the preliminary study revealed that local retailers can shape consumers' understanding of the cultural meanings associated with sustainable consumption, such as supporting local economies and appreciation for unique and authentic products.

Social institutions can be understood as the established norms, values, and structures that shape and sustain the practice of intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. These social institutions are embedded within the Fibershed community and the broader sustainable fashion movement, influencing the way individuals engage with materials, develop competences, and assign meanings to their consumption practices. These meanings, in turn, influence individuals' perceptions, motivations, and intentions, making the practice of supporting local retailers and sustainable apparel consumption more likely to be adopted and maintained. The fact that H1a, H1b, H2b, H9a, and H9b were all supported provides further evidence that community attachment and need for uniqueness shape consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. These results contribute to the meanings

associated with the practice, while the findings of the qualitative preliminary study emphasize the role of partnerships, networks, and community-centric approaches in shaping these meanings.

The interconnections between meanings (e.g., community attachment, need for uniqueness, consumer perceptions of local retailers, and their intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products), competences (e.g., awareness of environmental and social impacts), and materials (e.g., the presence of Fibershed affiliated products provided by local retailers), are crucial to understanding how the broader practice of sustainable apparel consumption can emerge and be sustained. For example, a consumer with a strong sense of community attachment (meaning) and an awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production and specifically fast fashion (competence) may be more likely to seek out local retailers offering sustainable, locally produced Fibershed garments (material). Similarly, a consumer with a high need for uniqueness (meaning) and an understanding of the social impacts of unethical labor practices (competence) may be drawn to the authentic, one-of-a-kind offerings of local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (material). Furthermore, local retailers' efforts to educate consumers about the environmental and social benefits of Fibershed affiliated products (fostering competences) and their commitment to the wellbeing of the local community, authenticity, and community partnerships (shaping meanings) can reinforce the perceived value and significance of the materials (Fibershed affiliated products) and ultimately contribute to the persistence and growth of the social practice (sustainable consumption).

Findings of the Phase I qualitative study and the Phase II quantitative study, combined, provide the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic interplay of materials, competences, and meanings that can contribute to the practice of patronizing local retailers selling sustainable apparel. Although the survey instrument does not fully capture the

habitual nature of consumer actions as detailed by SPT, it nevertheless sheds light on key values, perceptions, and intentions that contribute to the formation of the practice. When combined with the qualitative data, these insights provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the practice of sustainable consumption can emerge and be sustained. The qualitative findings, in particular, offer a contextualized view of how these elements interact within the context of the Fibershed movement and the broader framework of sustainable apparel and textile consumption. Moreover, the findings reveal the participants' holistic understanding of the goals of sustainability, in that it encompasses environmental, social, and economic dimensions. This understanding can be seen as a form of background knowledge, or know-how, that shapes their views on sustainable apparel and textile consumption as a practice. From a quantitative perspective, by testing hypothesized relationships between consumer values, awareness, perceptions, and intentions, the survey results provide empirical support for the act of patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as an emergent practice embedded in the larger practice of sustainable apparel consumption.

The emergence and sustenance of practices are depends on the broader social and institutional contexts in which they are embedded (Shove et al., 2012). Based on the findings of this dissertation, for the practice of patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products to be meaningfully embedded within sustainable apparel consumption practices, consumers need to have a strong sense of community attachment, a desire for unique and sustainable products, awareness of the environmental impacts of textile and apparel production, positive perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, and intentions to patronized these local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. These elements can contribute to the formation of meanings and competences that support sustainable apparel

consumption practices. The integration of local retailers into the Fibershed S2S framework can contribute to the development of these essential conditions, and this dissertation found that there is indeed the potential for the practice of patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products to be embedded within broader sustainable apparel consumption and production practices.

However, it is important to consider how these broader practices, as well as associated social norms, infrastructures, and policies, may enable or constrain a practice under investigation. That is, several barriers can hinder the establishment of patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as a social practice. For example, limited availability and accessibility of Fibershed-affiliated products can prevent the widespread adoption of sustainable purchasing behaviors. Additionally, a lack of awareness and understanding of Fibershed and sustainable consumption may impede the practice. Competing cultural values, such as the preference for fast fashion, or other forms of sustainable consumption like thrifting or clothes swapping, could further obstruct the establishment of sustainable purchasing of Fibershed products. Incompatibility with existing consumer routines and practices, as well as a lack of supportive social and institutional structures can also pose significant challenges. Finally, insufficient feedback and reinforcement for engaging in sustainable purchasing practices can prevent these behaviors from becoming habitual and widely recognized. Addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies targeting these interconnected elements to facilitate the establishment and sustenance of intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as a social practice.

Furthermore, it must be noted that there is a gap in research related to the patronizing of local retailers selling sustainable products as a social practice. While this dissertation

investigated the influence of community attachment, need for uniqueness, awareness of environmental and social impacts, and perceptions of sustainability commitment and authenticity on consumers' intentions, it is essential to recognize that these are components that can lead to the formation of the practice, but they may not be the only ones. For example, results showed that being aware of the social impacts of textile and apparel production did not necessarily affect consumers' perceptions of or intentions to patronize local retailers. Similarly, the findings from the qualitative study highlighted several concerns that could inhibit sustainable apparel consumption, such as the affordability of local sustainable apparel, lack of awareness regarding availability of local retailers selling locally produced sustainable products, availability of competing sustainable alternatives like clothes swapping or thrifting, as well as greenwashing, or lack of knowledge about the different aspects of sustainable apparel production and consumption. This point of view raises questions about the relative importance of various elements in the formation of the practice and the potential existence of other materials, competences, and meanings that were not captured in the research design of this dissertation. It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study in fully explaining the practice. As a mixed-method study, the findings are based on specific samples and contexts, and there may be other factors or contextual influences that were not captured in the study but could play a significant role in shaping the practice. Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias or other limitations.

While this dissertation cannot claim that the intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products is a fully established practice, or even a meaning contributing to the broader practices of sustainable apparel consumption, results point to essential conditions that need to be in place for the practice to emerge. Abend (2022) argued that social science should

focus on the empirical study of the conditions that make certain social phenomena possible. In line with this view, this dissertation has examined the patronizing of local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products as a potential practice, aiming to identify and empirically study the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that will enable it to become one.

By grounding the data collection and analysis in the specific context of Fibershed, key conditions that facilitate the emergence and persistence of sustainable textile production and consumption practices are proposed. However, the findings suggest that more research is needed in order to identify other possible elements necessary for the intention to patronize local retailers selling sustainable products like Fibershed to emerge as a meaningful component that reinforces the broader practices of sustainable apparel consumption. Future research could investigate role of such factors as economic, political, and technological influences on the formation, persistence, and disruption of the practice. Moreover, there may be additional conditions or factors not captured in the current study that could play a role in either enabling or hindering the practice, which could be the focus of future research studies.

By identifying the essential conditions necessary for the practice to emerge and highlighting potential areas for further investigation, this dissertation makes a significant contribution to understanding how consumers can be encouraged to support local retailers and to promote sustainable fashion consumption. This dissertation offers a foundation for understanding how the practice is embedded within the broader social context of the Fibershed community and is formed through the interconnections between individual, social, and material factors. Furthermore, integration of the quantitative findings with the qualitative insights strengthens the robustness of the conclusions and highlights the importance of a mixed-methods approach in understanding the complex nature of social practices. The next section addresses Objective

Three, which is to explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the Fibershed Soil-to-Soil (S2S) Framework.

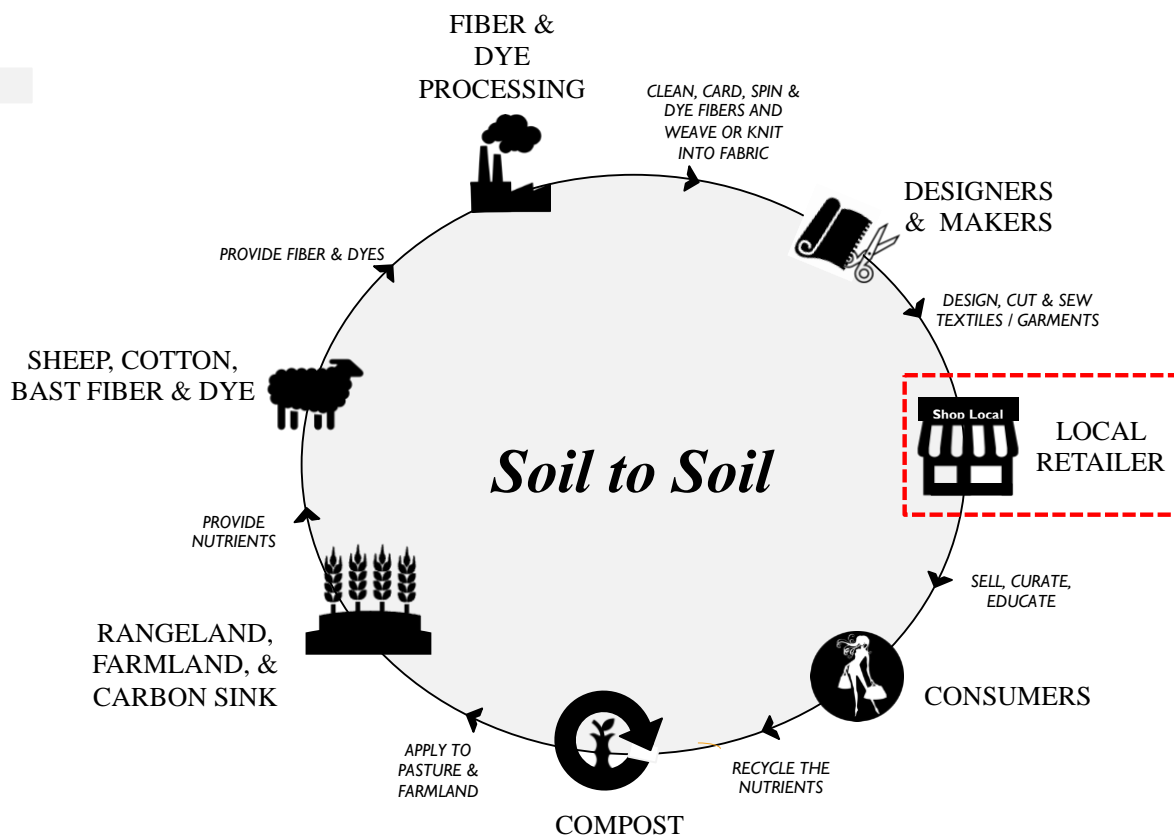
Objective Three: Explore the Extent to Which Local Retailers could be Integrated into the S2S Framework

Based on the initial findings of the qualitative study in Phase I and the subsequent quantitative analysis in Phase II, there is compelling evidence to advocate for the integration of local retailers into the Fibershed S2S Framework. Viewed through the lens of SPT, this dissertation outlines the central role local retailers can play in expanding sustainable production and consumption practices within the Fibershed movement by shaping the materials, competences, and meanings that interconnect to establish the action of patronizing local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as a social practice. As intermediaries between producers and consumers, these local retailers not only provide access to sustainably-produced apparel sourced from within the local region, but they also influence consumer behaviors and perceptions through community engagement and curated product offerings.

The integration of local retailers into the Fibershed S2S Framework, as depicted in Figure 30, represents a significant step towards creating a more comprehensive and sustainable local textile and apparel system. By positioning local retailers between designers and consumers, the updated framework recognizes the crucial role these retailers play in bridging the gap between sustainable production practices and the preferences of environmentally conscious consumers. This strategic placement highlights the potential of local retailers to influence consumer behavior, raise awareness about sustainable fashion, and foster a sense of community around shared values of sustainability and ethical consumption. Moreover, the inclusion of local retailers in the figure emphasizes their importance as key intermediaries in the Fibershed ecosystem,

facilitating the flow of sustainably-produced apparel from farmers and artisans to consumers, while also providing valuable feedback and insights to other stakeholders in the framework. By visualizing the central role of local retailers within the Fibershed S2S Framework, the figure underscores the transformative potential of these retailers in driving the adoption of more sustainable fashion practices and contributing to the achievement of Fibershed's sustainability goals.

Figure 30. Proposed Soil-to-Soil Framework Integrating the Local Retailer



By serving as the last link in the S2S Framework before consumption, local retailers can bridge the sustainable production practices of farmers, artisans, and manufacturers with the preferences of sustainably conscious consumers, thereby contributing to a resilient and equitable

local fashion system. By fostering strong relationships between producers, retailers, and consumers within a specific bioregion, Fibershed can create a supportive ecosystem that values sustainability, community well-being, and the preservation of traditional craftsmanship. Local retailers, being deeply connected with their communities, tend to have an in-depth understanding of local needs and preferences and therefore are well-positioned to support and enhance this ecosystem (Curtis, 2003; Boyd et al., 2017).

The qualitative findings of this study underscore the important role of local retailers in promoting consumer education, community involvement, and the promotion of unique Fibershed products. The quantitative findings further substantiate the influence of consumers' values, awareness, and perceptions on their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. By integrating local retailers into the S2S Framework, Fibershed can effectively add to the existing stakeholder groups within the framework to ensure an ecosystem where both sustainable production as well as accessibility of Fibershed products by consumers is achieved.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study regards local retailers as key stakeholders capable of shaping the practices of sustainable apparel and textile consumption through their ability to influence meanings, competences, and materials. By curating a selection of Fibershed affiliated products, educating consumers about their unique qualities and authentic production practices, and creating a sense of community and shared values, local retailers can actively influence the formation and persistence of sustainable apparel and textile consumption practices. This view underscores the potential for local retailers to be powerful agents of change within the Fibershed movement, driving the adoption of more sustainable and ethical fashion practices. The data collected provides clear evidence that the inclusion of local retailers in the Fibershed S2S

framework could significantly advance Fibershed's goals for sustainable textile and apparel consumption and local sustainable supply chains.

To support this integration, Fibershed could develop a strong network of committed local retailers by providing resources, collaboration opportunities, and knowledge-sharing platforms. Working closely with these retailers, Fibershed can create educational materials and initiatives that raise awareness about the environmental and social impacts of fashion production and consumption, while highlighting the unique benefits of Fibershed affiliated products. Alongside their existing practices of hosting events and workshops, Fibershed can develop partner programs that offer tools for local retailers to encourage sustainable consumption behaviors among consumers and spread awareness of the need for sustainable apparel consumption as a part of the Fibershed S2S framework.

Moreover, Fibershed can aid local retailers in adopting sustainable business practices, such as waste reduction, circular economy principles, and fair labor practices, ensuring alignment of the retail aspects of the supply chain with Fibershed's values and objectives. By actively integrating local retailers into the S2S framework and supporting their efforts to reach consumers, Fibershed can enhance awareness about the impacts of textile production and consumption and help in the development of a more localized and sustainable fashion ecosystem. The integration of local retailers represents a crucial step in realizing the circularity envisioned by Fibershed and, ultimately, catalyzing transformative change in the apparel and textile industry.

Conclusions

This dissertation aimed to address three main objectives: (1) to understand the perceptions of and expectations for sustainability among members of Fibershed and specifically relative to

the S2S Framework; (2) to investigate consumers' perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products; and (3) to explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to address Fibershed's goals for sustainability. To achieve this purpose, a mixed methods approach grounded in the theoretical framework of Social Practice Theory was used. Phase I being exploratory, a qualitative approach was used to identify Fibershed stakeholder groups, explore the perceptions of stakeholder group members regarding the sustainability goals of Fibershed, and examine their views on the role of local retailer in advancing sustainable apparel consumption practices. In Phase II, the main study, a quantitative approach was used to investigate the influences of specific consumer values and awareness on consumer perceptions and behaviors. Finally, synthesizing the findings of Phase I and Phase II, the role of the local retailer within the Fibershed S2S framework was assessed.

The findings of the qualitative study and review of extant literature as discussed in Chapter II informed the development of the conceptual model (Figure 12, see page 95) used to test the effect of consumer values and awareness on their perceptions and behaviors. Specifically, the model tested the influence of community attachment, need for uniqueness, and consumers' awareness of the environmental and social impacts of textile and apparel production on their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and perceived authenticity. The model also examined the effects of all variables on consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. A series of hypotheses were developed to test these relationships.

Structural equation modeling with latent variable path analysis was used to evaluate the model and assess both the measurement and structural model fit. In this dissertation, community attachment, need for uniqueness, environmental impact, social impact, commitment to

sustainability, authenticity, and intention to patronize local retailers were the latent variables, represented by their respective observed variables (Table 12, see page 176). Community attachment, need for uniqueness, environmental impact, and social impact were the exogenous variables and consumers' perceptions of local retailers' sustainability, authenticity, and intentions to patronize local retailers were the endogenous variables.

Using survey methodology, empirical data were gathered through the online portal Prolific. The survey targeted participants over the age of 18 based in the US and 300 valid usable responses were obtained. Using a two-stage approach, the data were analyzed, and tests conducted to examine the proposed research hypotheses. In the first stage, the measurement model was tested using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Upon confirmation of the goodness of fit of the measurement model, the structural model was tested in the second stage using latent variable structural equation model analysis. The results indicated significant relationships among the various constructs represented in the research model, except for the interaction effect between the awareness of social impacts of apparel and textile production and the related hypotheses.

Given the current state of the global apparel supply chain, and the harmful impact of fast fashion consumption choices, the study examined the influences of consumer values and awareness on their perceptions and behaviors related to local retailers selling sustainable apparel such as Fibershed products, and findings offer valuable insights into the potential for alternative, localized sustainable supply chains. The dissertation also identified the meanings, materials, and competences that work to delineate the act of intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products as a meaningful addition to the practice of sustainable apparel and textile consumption. Specifically, several conclusions can be drawn from the results of the study.

First, the results show that community attachment has a significant, positive influence on consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity, which mediates their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. As per the findings, consumers with strong connections and attachment to their local community are more likely to view local retailers as committed to sustainable practices and authentic in their offerings. These retailers are perceived as representing the characteristics of community, sustainability and authenticity that resonate with some consumers (Miller, 2001; Wilson & Hodges, 2022). Therefore, when managing relationships with customers, local retailers should focus on fostering a strong sense of community and emphasizing their genuine commitment to sustainability and authenticity.

Second, the study found that need for uniqueness is an important factor that influences consumers' perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, but not their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability. This result indicates that consumers who seek distinctiveness and originality in their purchases are more likely to perceive local retailers as authentic, but unlike the results of prior studies, this need for uniqueness does not necessarily translate into perceptions of sustainability commitment (Lang & Armstrong, 2018; Tian et al., 2001). Local retailers should therefore focus on highlighting the unique and authentic aspects of their offerings to appeal to consumers with a high need for uniqueness.

Third, the study revealed that consumers' awareness of the environmental impact of apparel and textile production has a significant positive influence on their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity and their intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products (Dickson, 1999; Diddi & Niehm, 2016). However, like the previous finding regarding

need for uniqueness, there was no significant impact of environmental awareness on consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability. Not only does this finding highlight the need to educate consumers about the environmental impact of their fashion choices, it emphasizes the ways local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products can authentically curate and promote sustainable items that could help mitigate the consequences of unsustainable production and consumption practices. Moreover, local retailers should prioritize raising awareness about the environmental benefits of their offerings to attract environmentally-conscious consumers.

Fourth, the results showed that consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity have significant, positive effects on their intentions to patronize these retailers, which confirms the important role perceptions play in shaping consumers' behaviors (Mauri et al., 2022; Sánchez-González et al., 2020). Local retailers should therefore focus on consistently communicating and demonstrating their commitment to sustainability and authenticity to encourage customer patronage.

Lastly, it was interesting to find that the proposed relationships between consumers' awareness of the social impacts of apparel and textile production and their perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability, authenticity, as well as intentions to patronize local retailer selling Fibershed affiliated products were not significant. Although previous studies have concluded that social factors impact consumer attitudes and behaviors, there have also been studies that showed these factors do not affect consumers' behaviors (Diddi & Niehm, 2016). Despite the non-significant results, with social equity and justice being important to the Fibershed movement, local retailers should make attempts to highlight the aspects of Fibershed products that benefit both the community as well as the environment.

To summarize, this study contributes to a better understanding of the factors influencing consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The findings emphasize the importance of community attachment, need for uniqueness, awareness of the environmental impacts, and perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity in shaping consumers' behavioral intentions. Local retailers can use these insights to develop targeted strategies for attracting and retaining customers who value sustainable and authentic fashion choices, including Fibershed affiliated products. By fostering strong community connections, highlighting unique offerings, and being committed to sustainability and authenticity, local retailers can effectively promote the adoption of sustainable fashion practices and contribute to the growth of the Fibershed movement.

Implications

Based on the investigation of the effect of consumers' values and awareness on their perceptions and behavioral intentions, the study offers valuable insights that have theoretical, managerial, and practical implications for local sustainable textile and apparel supply chains and the broader field of sustainable fashion.

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation provides several theoretical implications that are relevant to the growing body of literature on Social Practice Theory, slow fashion and local sustainable supply chains, as well as sustainable consumption. First, this dissertation is among the first to attempt to identify the act of intention to patronize local retailer selling Fibershed affiliated products as a social practice within the sustainable apparel consumption movement. Using a mixed methods research design, this dissertation linked individual factors (e.g., values, perceptions, intentions) to broader social contexts (e.g., community, Fibershed movement) to identify the elements of materials,

meanings, and competences that could lead to the formation and persistence of the practice. With the qualitative study providing the contextual factors and the quantitative study providing empirical evidence on the various individual factors that could affect the practice, this dissertation takes a novel approach in considering both micro and macro factors when analyzing the intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed-affiliated products as a social practice.

Second, the study contributes to the literature on slow fashion and sustainable apparel and textile supply chains by exploring the phenomenon of Fibershed as a local sustainable supply chain alternative. Through extensive review of the literature on the global textile and apparel industry, linear and circular supply chains, as well as the concepts of fast and slow fashion, this dissertation provided further support for the argument that the current global textile and apparel industry contributes to environmental degradation and social inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for more sustainable alternatives. Subsequently, through an in-depth exploration of the concept of Fibershed via the literature review, in-depth interviews with Fibershed members, and netnographic analysis of the Fibershed organization, the study explicated the objectives and sustainability goals of Fibershed from a more academic perspective than currently exists. The research also investigated how Fibershed functions as a model for local sustainable supply chains, promoting eco-friendly practices, supporting local communities, and fostering a more transparent and ethical approach to textile and apparel production and consumption. Finally, this dissertation offers the view, supported by the data, that the local retailer can and should be integrated into the Fibershed network as a part of the S2S Framework.

Third, the study contributes to the literature on sustainable consumption practices by developing a conceptual model that examines the various factors that influence consumer perceptions and behaviors. The study contributes to the literature on community attachment and

need for uniqueness, as well as consumer perceptions of local retailers' sustainability commitment and authenticity by examining these factors relative to consumers' intention to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The findings suggest that these factors play a significant role in shaping consumers' perceptions of local retailers' sustainability and authenticity, and ultimately, their intentions to patronize them. This dissertation therefore expands our understanding of how these factors influence consumer behavior in the context of sustainable consumption and highlights their potential as drivers of change in the fashion industry.

The study also contributes to the growing literature on the environmental and social impacts of apparel and textile production and consumption by investigating the influence of consumers' awareness of these impacts on their perceptions and intentions. By finding significant relationships between consumers' awareness of environmental impacts, their perceptions of local retailers' authenticity, and their intention to patronize local retailers, the dissertation highlights the importance of raising awareness about the environmental consequences of fashion choices, and specifically how local retailers selling sustainable products can help mitigate these impacts. Moreover, even the non-significant results of the relationships between consumers' awareness of social impacts and their perceptions and intentions provide valuable insights for future research to explore the complex dynamics of sustainable consumption practices. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to promoting sustainable apparel consumption, encompassing consumer education, retailer marketing strategies, and policy initiatives.

Finally, by using a mixed methods approach, this study highlights the importance of integrating qualitative and quantitative research in investigating a relatively unknown and

complex social phenomenon like Fibershed. The qualitative findings provide rich context and in-depth insights into the phenomenon of Fibershed, and the different meanings, competences, and materials associated with Fibershed as a sustainable supply chain alternative, while the quantitative results offer empirical support for the relationships between individual factors and the elements of the practice. This approach highlights the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative research and the potential for mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable consumption practices.

Managerial and Practical Implications

The findings of this dissertation provide several implications for managers and practical decision making in the textile and apparel supply chain, particularly those involved in local retailing and sustainable apparel and textile initiatives like the Fibershed movement. The positive relationships between community attachment, need for uniqueness, and consumers' perceptions of local retailers' commitment to sustainability and authenticity indicates the need for local retailers to create strong community connections, offer unique and distinctive products, and consistently demonstrate a genuine commitment to sustainable practices and authenticity. Given the significant results related to need for uniqueness, local retailers should leverage this insight by emphasizing the unique, artisanal, and locally sourced nature of the Fibershed offerings in their marketing and branding strategies.

To effectively attract and retain customers, local retailers should focus on developing and communicating their engagement, sustainability initiatives, and authenticity to the local community through their branding, marketing, and customer engagement strategies. Examples could include actively participating in community events, supporting local initiatives, collaborating with local artisans and designers to create exclusive offerings, and providing

transparent information about their sourcing and production practices. These activities will help strengthen relations with their consumers and lead to favourable perceptions of sustainability and authenticity, thereby enabling them to differentiate themselves in the competitive marketplace and build a loyal customer base that values sustainable and locally produced apparel and textile options. Conversely, doing so would help promote Fibershed more broadly, and the same time, directly to the consumer.

The study also highlights the importance of raising consumer awareness about the environmental impact of fashion production and consumption. The significant results related to the relationships between consumers' environmental awareness and their perceptions and intentions suggest that consumers who are more aware of the environmental consequences of their fashion choices are more likely to perceive local retailers selling sustainable products as authentic and to ultimately patronize them. Managers should therefore prioritize educating consumers about the environmental impacts of the fashion industry and how their Fibershed product offerings can help mitigate these impacts. Examples can include providing transparent information about their sourcing and production practices, collaborating with environmental organizations to raise awareness, and engaging customers in discussions about sustainable fashion choices, including Fibershed products.

Last, several implications can be drawn for stakeholders within the apparel and textile supply chain. This dissertation provides guidance on how to motivate customers to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed products by highlighting the characteristics of community engagement, unique product offerings, environmental impact awareness, and consistent demonstration of sustainability commitment and authenticity, all of which could help differentiate them from competitors and build a loyal customer base. For producers, the findings

suggest the need for collaboration with local businesses and initiatives like the Fibershed movement to develop sustainable production practices, build relationships with local retailers, and contribute to the development of a more resilient and equitable local fashion system. For consumers, the study emphasizes the overarching need to educate them about the environmental and social impacts of their fashion choices and why supporting local retailers who are committed to sustainable practices will make a difference. For policymakers, the insights gleaned from this study provide guidance to develop policies and programs that incentivize sustainable production and consumption practices, support Fibershed's local businesses in their sustainability initiatives, and promote community resilience.

Implications for Fibershed

Finally, the findings of this study have important implications for the Fibershed movement and its goals for sustainability. The study highlights the potential for local retailers to play a crucial role in promoting sustainable production and consumption practices within the Fibershed movement. The findings demonstrate the importance of fostering strong community connections, offering unique and authentic products, raising environmental awareness, and consistently demonstrating a commitment to sustainability in shaping consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. The research provides empirical evidence supporting the integration of local retailers into the Fibershed S2S Framework to create a more sustainable, resilient, and equitable fashion system. The study contributes to the understanding of sustainable fashion consumption within the context of the Fibershed movement and offers valuable insights for advancing Fibershed's mission.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, the following recommendations are made for Fibershed to effectively integrate local retailers into the S2S Framework and advance its

sustainability goals. First, Fibershed should engage and support local retailers as key partners by developing targeted strategies to identify, recruit, and collaborate with those who align with Fibershed's values and mission, while providing resources, training, and incentives to help them adopt and promote sustainable fashion practices. Second, Fibershed should strengthen connections within its ecosystem by creating initiatives that foster meaningful interactions and collaborations between local retailers, producers, and consumers, such as organizing community events, workshops, and educational programs that showcase the value of local, sustainable fashion and build a sense of shared purpose.

Third, Fibershed should collaborate with local retailers and producers to co-create and market products that embody the unique character and heritage of the local community while adhering to Fibershed's sustainability principles, highlighting the stories and values behind these products to differentiate them in the market and attract conscious consumers. Additionally, Fibershed should partner with local retailers to develop compelling educational content that raises awareness about the environmental and social benefits of Fibershed affiliated products and the broader impact of sustainable fashion practices, utilizing various media channels and in-store displays to reach and engage diverse consumer audiences.

Fourth, to support local retailers in their sustainability efforts, Fibershed should offer resources, templates, and best practices to help them adopt and communicate sustainable business practices, such as ethical sourcing, eco-friendly production methods, and waste reduction strategies, while recognizing and celebrating those who demonstrate leadership and innovation in sustainability. Furthermore, Fibershed should establish a robust network of local retailers within its ecosystem to facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and collective action

towards sustainability goals, creating platforms and communication channels that enable retailers to connect, learn from each other, and jointly address challenges and opportunities.

Last, Fibershed should collaborate with local retailers and other stakeholders to advocate for policies and programs that incentivize sustainable production and consumption practices, support local businesses, and promote community resilience, engaging with policymakers, industry associations, and other influential actors to create an enabling environment for sustainable fashion. By implementing these recommendations, Fibershed can leverage the insights from this dissertation to drive meaningful change in the apparel and textile industry. Through strategic partnerships with local retailers, Fibershed can create a more sustainable and equitable fashion ecosystem that benefits producers, consumers, and the environment, setting a powerful example and inspiring other organizations and communities to do the same.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As with any research study, this dissertation has several limitations that provide opportunities for further research. In this section, the limitations and corresponding areas for future research are discussed.

To begin, one of the objectives of this study was to explore the extent to which local retailers could be integrated into the S2S Framework to help address Fibershed's goals for sustainability. To achieve this objective, Phase I of the dissertation explored the viewpoint of Fibershed members with regards to Fibershed goals and the potential role of local retailers in the Fibershed S2S Framework. In Phase II, a quantitative study obtained empirical evidence of the different factors that influence consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products. However, the views of actual local retailers, whose integration into the Fibershed S2S framework is one of the objectives of the dissertation, were not included in the

study. Thus, future research should address this gap by including local retailers to better understand their views on local sustainable supply chains, inclusion of locally produced sustainable products in their merchandising assortments, and the role of Fibershed in establishing sustainable apparel and textile production and consumption as social practice.

The second limitation is related to the theoretical foundation of SPT and the methods used to determine the practice. This dissertation used a mixed methods approach to combine the investigation of individual factors with broader social contexts to determine the interconnection of elements of materials, meanings, and competences that could potentially lead to the formation of a practice (e.g., intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products). However, SPT typically uses the qualitative research methods of ethnography, interviews, and participant observation to explore everyday practices and behaviors. Such methods allow researchers to understand how social norms, cultural contexts, and material conditions shape and are shaped by human actions and reproduced and transformed over time (Shove et al., 2012). Future research can employ these qualitative research approaches to gain a more in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and routines of consumers who patronize local retailers selling locally produced sustainable products like Fibershed-affiliated products, thereby providing a richer and more nuanced perspective on the emergence and persistence of this practice.

Third, while the current study investigated the influence of community attachment, need for uniqueness, awareness of environmental and social impact, and perceptions of sustainability commitment and authenticity on consumers' intentions, it is essential to recognize that these factors may not be the only determinants. The study's findings raise important questions about which enabling conditions are required for the act of intention to patronize local retailers selling

Fibershed affiliated products to emerge as a social practice. Future research should explore additional factors that may enhance, advance, or inhibit the formation of this practice, such as price sensitivity, product availability, convenience, and competing consumption priorities. Additional considerations such as individual values and motivations, as well as contextual factors such as access to local retailers can also influence the formation of this practice.

Fourth, while this study provides valuable insights into the factors influencing consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, it is important to acknowledge that the study focused on the intentions rather than actual behaviors. Although Ajzen (1991) notes that intentions are the most proximal predictors of behavior, they do not automatically translate into behavior. Prior studies on sustainability have noted the intention-behavior gap (Diddi & Niehm, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2023). Actual purchasing behavior can often be impacted by several variables that affect the outcome of the consumer patronage. Future studies can investigate whether consumers actually patronize local retailers to purchase sustainable apparel by collecting data on actual purchase histories, conducting observational studies in retail settings, or employing longitudinal research strategies to assess the extent to which consumers' intentions align with their real-world actions. By investigating the potential gap between intentions and behavior, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder the translation of sustainable fashion intentions into concrete consumer choices.

Fifth, this dissertation is limited in its geographical scope. The qualitative phase of the research limited participants to members of Fibershed located within the United States. Further, for the quantitative survey, participant selection was limited to individuals living in the United States. Sustainable consumption practices are relevant across the globe, and the Fibershed

movement has a presence in various countries in Europe, Asia, and South America, in addition to the United States. Limiting this study to participants within the United States may have restricted the findings to a specific cultural context and therefore, failed to capture the diverse perspectives and practices present in different international contexts. In order to increase the generalizability of the findings and assess their applicability to the other cultural and geographic settings, cross cultural studies should be conducted in the future to identify potential cultural differences in consumer values, perceptions, and behaviors related to sustainable apparel consumption, and to ultimately develop culturally-sensitive strategies for promoting sustainable apparel and textile consumption through local retailers.

Lastly, the study examined the survey data set in its entirety and did not break it down by sample characteristics such as age, gender, political affiliation, income, or education.

Consequently, the study did not explore potentially significant variations in attitudes and behaviors across different demographic groups, which could impact the generalizability and specificity of the findings. This limitation opens the way for the future research studies to conduct analyses by subgroups to identify and understand the differences in sustainable apparel and textile consumption behaviors and perceptions among various demographic segments.

Additionally, examining these characteristics could provide more targeted insights for practitioners and policy makers who aim to promote sustainable behaviors across diverse populations, Additionally, examining these characteristics could provide more targeted insights for practitioners and policy makers who aim to promote sustainable behaviors across diverse populations. Doing so could also provide insights for local retailers to tailor their marketing strategies, product offerings, and in-store experiences to better cater to the unique needs and preferences of different consumer groups. By considering demographic factors, local retailers

can enhance their ability to effectively engage and attract a wider range of customers, ultimately contributing to the success of sustainable apparel initiatives and the Fibershed movement.

This dissertation explored the phenomenon of Fibershed, an organization involved in the development of regional sustainable supply chains. In order to determine if there is a role for the local retailer within the Fibershed S2S Framework, the dissertation used a mixed-method approach to investigate the perceptions and expectations of sustainability among Fibershed members, examine the factors influencing consumers' intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed affiliated products, and propose strategies for integrating local retailers into the S2S Framework. By applying Social Practice Theory, findings of this dissertation shed light on the complex interplay of individual and social factors in shaping sustainable consumption practices and reveal the potential for local retailers to drive meaningful change in the apparel and textile industry. By promoting sustainable, community-centric, and authentic offerings through Fibershed affiliated products, local retailers can serve as the critical link between producers and consumers within the Fibershed Soil to Soil Framework.

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APPENDIX A: PRELIMINARY STUDY – INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



December 16, 2022

Uma Swamy
Nancy Hodges
Consumer Apparel-Retail Stds

Re: Exempt - Initial - IRB-FY23-172 - Soil to Salesfloor and Back Again – Understanding the Perceptions of and Expectations for Sustainability Among Fibershed Members

Dear **Uma Swamy**:

UNCG Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for Soil to Salesfloor and Back Again – Understanding the Perceptions of and Expectations for Sustainability Among Fibershed Members.

Decision: Exempt

Approval: December 16, 2022

Selected Category: 2(ii)

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b).

Investigator's Responsibilities

- ***IMPORTANT: If your study is funded***, your funds will not be released by the Contract & Grant Accounting (CGA) office until documentation of IRB approval is confirmed. Please link your Cayuse Human Ethics record to your Cayuse SP record so that the CGA office can confirm approval. Instructions for linking an application can be found on the [Cayuse Human Ethics resource page](#). If your Ramses record has not been migrated to Cayuse SP, you may also forward this approval letter to the Contract & Grant Accounting Director, Bill Walters (wdwalter@uncg.edu).
- Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at http://policy.uncg.edu/university-policies/research_data/.
- **Please utilize the the consent form/information sheet with the most recent version date when enrolling participants.**

- Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented.
- **If your study is funded**, please note that it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to link your IRB application to your Cayuse SP record.

Sincerely,

UNCG Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX B: PRELIMINARY STUDY – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

Part I: General Views on Sustainability and Sustainable Fashion

1. How do you define “sustainable fashion”?
2. Why do you think sustainable fashion is important? (Probe on environmental, social, and economic sustainability if any part is missing)
3. Describe some of the difficulties of promoting sustainable fashion in general?
4. Do you think there is a gap between intention and behavior among consumers when it comes to sustainable apparel consumption? If so, why do you think it is so?
5. How do you think this gap can be addressed and consumers can be encouraged to purchase more local sustainable apparel?
6. Do you have examples of success stories of brands that have become popular with consumers?
7. Do you think government policies and legislation can have an impact on sustainable fashion production and consumption? If yes, how?
8. Identify level of familiarity with issues in sustainable fashion among respondents using a structured questionnaire and five level Likert Scale responses that capture the degree of familiarity:
 1. ‘Less familiar
 2. ‘Slightly’
 3. ‘Moderately’
 4. ‘Familiar’
 5. ‘Very Familiar’

- a. Choice of eco-materials and products
- b. Green label
- c. Control of hazardous substances
- d. Eco labelling
- e. Green energy
- f. Manufacturing waste
- g. Ethical manufacturing
- h. Clothing distribution & packages
- i. Ethical consumption
- j. Up-cycling & repairing
- k. Consumer care & washing
- l. Clothing disposal
- m. Socio-cultural well-being
- n. Social justice
- o. Sustainable product service system

Part II: Perspectives on and Experiences with Fibershed Organization and FStS

framework

- 9. When and how did you become associated with Fibershed?
- 10. What differentiates Fibershed as an organization that is focused on sustainable fashion compared to other sustainability initiatives? Why?
- 11. Describe your experiences working with your customers.
- 12. Has your market expanded over time as part of the FStS Framework?
- 13. What are your thoughts on the different stakeholders within the FStS Framework?

14. Based on your role in the FStS Framework, what are the barriers and challenges faced by the Fibershed organization in adopting sustainable practices?
15. Do you have access to all the processes and are support structure available that are required to make a finished apparel in your Fibershed? From ranchers and farmers who produce fiber to mill owners to processors to dyers and designers and sewers, are all the components available (scouring, weaving, dyeing, cutting, sewing) to construct garments and accessories within the local Fibershed and sell it to the end consumers? If not, please explain.
16. Do you think it is economically viable for the stakeholders (you as a _____) to participate in the Fibershed production and supply chain process?
17. How do you see the idea of the regional Fibershed impacting and benefitting the local community in terms proximity, relationship networking and overall prosperity (economic, cultural, social) of the local community?
18. How can you encourage more stakeholders to participate in the Fibershed process and contribute to sustainable fashion?
19. What model does Fibershed adopt for selling its products, from fiber to finished products? (Direct to Consumer, Traditional supply chain through Retailer, Online Retail, Brick and Mortar, Mixed Channels)
20. Is there a role for the retailer in the in the Fibershed process?
21. Do you think there is a place for the retailer in the traditional sense, as a middle person between the manufacturer and consumer? If yes why, if not why?
22. Do you have any other thoughts or comments that you would like to share? Are there any areas that we have not covered in this discussion, and you would like to talk about?

APPENDIX C: MAIN STUDY - SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study.

Protocol Title: From Soil to Salesfloor: Exploring the Potential for Retailer Integration Into the Fibershed Framework.

Principal Investigator:

Uma Swamy
Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies,
P.O. Box 26170, Greensboro,
NC 27402-6170
Tel: 650 398 7401

What is this all about? I am inviting you to participate in this research study about understanding the role of local retailers within Fibershed and their Soil-to-Soil Framework. This research project will involve you answering questions about perceptions of and intentions to patronize local retailers selling Fibershed manufactured products, your personal values and demographics. Your participation will take about 10 minutes of your time. Your participation in this research project is voluntary and you can skip any questions you don't want to answer.

Are there any Risks? There may be potential risks related to confidentiality as discussed below. However, participation in this research study is entirely voluntary.

What about my confidentiality? We will do everything possible to make sure that your information is kept confidential, but absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. We will not ask for any identifying information other than your numeric Prolific ID so that you can be paid through Prolific. Data, including your Prolific ID will be stored for five years in an encrypted folder in UNCG approved data storage locations as outlined in the UNCG Data classification policy. After five years, all data will be deleted.

Absolute confidentiality of data provided through the Internet cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access. Please be sure to close your browser when finished so no one will be able to see what you have been doing.

What if I do not want to be in this research study? You do not have to be part of this project. This project is voluntary, and it is up to you to decide to participate in this research project. If you agree to participate, at any time in this project you may stop participating without penalty. If you do not finish the survey in its entirety, you will be paid a prorated amount based on the amount of the survey you have completed.

Will I be paid? You will be paid \$1 through Prolific after providing a quality, completed survey. Payments will not be prorated and will be made based on completing the survey in its entirety, and answering the attention check questions correctly.

What if I have questions? You can ask Uma Swamy at usswamy@uncg.edu and Dr. Nancy Hodges at njnelson@uncg.edu anything about the study. If you have concerns about how you have been treated in this study call the Office of Research Integrity Director at 1-855-251-2351 or ori@uncg.edu.

By continuing with the study, you confirm that you have read and fully understood the contents above and voluntarily consent to participate in this study. If you wish, you can print or take a screenshot of this consent page for your records.

Screening Questions

1. By clicking yes, I state that I have received full detailed information concerning the conditions of my participation of the study. I agree with these conditions, and I am willing to participate.

I agree to participate in the research study described above.

I do not agree to participate in the research study described above.

2. Are you 18 years of age or older?

Yes

No

What is your Prolific ID? _____

General Instructions: The following are definitions of terms relevant to the study:

Fibershed: A non-profit organization made up of networks of local small businesses whose aim is to promote climate conducive farming, reconstitute regional manufacturing, create locally focused supply chains, create textiles and garments based on sustainability principles and transparent garment production processes, and connect end users to their apparel source by way of education.

Local Retailer: Typically refers to small-scale retail establishments primarily serving the immediate community and distinct from national chains or large-scale corporations. They support the local economy by hiring local employees and sourcing products from local suppliers.

Fibershed Affiliated Sustainable Products: Products made by independent producers affiliated with Fibershed. These products are made from locally grown materials and involve a mindful approach to production that considers the impacts of production on workers, communities, the environment, and ecosystems. For example, Fibershed products can include ready-to-wear garments and accessories, natural dyes, housewares (such as baskets, blankets, pillows, candles, soaps), various fibers (such as fleece).

Main Survey Questions

Section 1: Community Attachment

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1 I am involved in my community activities	1	2	3	4	5
2 I am interested in knowing what goes on in my community	1	2	3	4	5
3 I feel that I fit well into my community	1	2	3	4	5
4 I have a lot in common with most of the people in my community	1	2	3	4	5
5 I am satisfied that this is the best possible place I could live in	1	2	3	4	5
6 I would be very sorry if I had to move away from my community	1	2	3	4	5

7 I feel at home in my community	1	2	3	4	5
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Section 2: Need for Uniqueness

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1 I am often on the lookout for one-of-a-kind products or brands, so that I can create a style that is all my own	1	2	3	4	5
2 Often when buying apparel, an important goal is to find something that communicates my uniqueness	1	2	3	4	5
3 I often try to find a more interesting version of ordinary or run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.	1	2	3	4	5
4 I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands	1	2	3	4	5
5 Having an eye for products that are interesting and unusual assists me in establishing a distinctive image	1	2	3	4	5
6 I am often on the lookout for new products and brands that will add to my personal uniqueness	1	2	3	4	5

Section 3: Awareness of the Environmental Impact of Textile and Apparel Production

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1 Chemical pollutants are produced during manufacturing	1	2	3	4	5

	of synthetic or manufactured fibers such as polyester					
2	Air pollution can occur during some common dye processes of textiles	1	2	3	4	5
3	Textile dyeing and finishing processes use a lot of water	1	2	3	4	5
4	Phosphate-containing laundry detergents can be a source of water pollution	1	2	3	4	5

Section 4: Awareness of the Social Impact of Textile and Apparel Production

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	
1	Use of child labor is a practice among apparel manufacturers	1	2	3	4	5
2	Apparel manufacturers generally do not pay their employees at least the local minimum wage	1	2	3	4	5
3	If you read this statement, select strongly agree	1	2	3	4	5
4	Apparel manufacturers generally have their employees work more than 40 hours per week	1	2	3	4	5
5	Apparel manufacturers generally provide hazardous workplaces for their employees	1	2	3	4	5

Section 5: Consumers' Perceptions of Retailers' Commitment to Sustainability

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
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1	Local retailers are responsible towards the environment	1	2	3	4	5
2	Local retailers support worthy causes	1	2	3	4	5
3	Local retailers are concerned with improving society welfare	1	2	3	4	5
4	Local retailers keep up high ethical standards	1	2	3	4	5
5	Local retailers are socially responsible	1	2	3	4	5
6	Local retailers make sustained efforts to create new jobs	1	2	3	4	5
7	Local retailers protect employees	1	2	3	4	5

Section 6: Consumers' Perceptions of Retailers' Authenticity

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

		Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1	Local retailers are stores with a tradition	1	2	3	4	5
2	The promise of local retailers is closely linked to their traditions	1	2	3	4	5
3	Local retailers are conscious of their traditions	1	2	3	4	5
4	Local retail stores are different from all other stores	1	2	3	4	5
5	Local retail stores stand out from all other stores	1	2	3	4	5
6	I think local retail stores are unique	1	2	3	4	5
7	I think local retail stores clearly distinguish themselves from other stores	1	2	3	4	5

Section 7: Intention to Patronize Local Retailers Selling Fibershed Affiliated Products

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
1 I will only purchase from local retailers that are committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products	1	2	3	4	5
2 I have an obligation to support local retailers that are committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products	1	2	3	4	5
3 I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products	1	2	3	4	5
4 I would be more likely to recommend a local retailer to others if it was involved with selling Fibershed affiliated products.	1	2	3	4	5
5 I would be more likely to buy from a local retailer if I knew it was more committed to selling Fibershed affiliated products than another competing retailer	1	2	3	4	5

Have you purchased any sustainable products or sustainable apparel within the last year?

Yes

No

Demographic Questions

Q1. Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

Q2. Which of the following categories describe your age?

- 18 – 21 years
- 22 – 35 years
- 36 – 45 years
- 46 – 55 years

- 56 – 65 years
- 66 years and over

Q3. What is your race or ethnicity?

- White/Caucasian
- Hispanic/Latin
- Black/African American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other (please specify)

Q4. What is your state of residence? (Select from the dropdown list)

Q5. What is your highest level of education?

- High School Diploma
- Some College
- 4-year Degree
- Graduate/Postgraduate
- Other (please specify)

Q6. What is your marital status?

- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married
- Other (please specify)

Q7. Which of the following categories describes your annual household income before tax?

- Under \$20,000
- \$20,000– \$39,999
- \$40,000– \$59,999
- \$60,000– \$79,999
- \$80,000– \$99,999
- \$100,000– \$119,999
- \$120,000– \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more

Q8. Which of the following best describes the place where you now live...a large city, a suburb near a large city, a small city or town, or a rural area?

- A large city (Population > 500,000)
- A suburb near a large city
- A small city or town (Population > 50,000)
- A rural area

Q9. How would you describe your political orientation? Choose the category that best describes your current beliefs.

- Very conservative
- Moderately conservative
- Moderate
- Moderately progressive or liberal
- Very progressive or liberal
- Unsure or apolitical

Q10. If you have any comments on this research project, please share your comments with us.

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX D: MAIN STUDY – INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



UNC GREENSBORO

March 26, 2024

Uma Swamy
Nancy Hodges, Jin Su

Consumer Apparel-Retail Stds

Re: Exempt - Initial - IRB-FY24-284 From Soil to Salesfloor: Exploring the Potential for Retailer Integration Into the Fibershed Framework

Dear Dr. Uma Swamy:

UNCG Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for From Soil to Salesfloor: Exploring the Potential for Retailer Integration Into the Fibershed Framework.

Decision: Exempt

Approval: March 26, 2024

Administrative Check-In Date: August 8, 2024

Selected Category: Category 2.(i). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;

This submission has been reviewed by the IRB and was determined to be exempt according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.104.

Investigator's Responsibilities

- *IMPORTANT: If your study is funded, your funds will not be released by the Contract & Grant Accounting (CGA) office until documentation of IRB approval is confirmed. Please link your Cayuse Human Ethics record to your Cayuse SP record so that the CGA office can confirm approval. Instructions for linking an application can be found on the [Cayuse Human Ethics resource page](#).*
- Please be aware that valid human subjects training and signed statements of confidentiality for all members of research team need to be kept on file with the lead investigator. Please note that you will also need to remain in compliance with the university "Access To and Retention of Research Data" Policy which can be found at https://policy.uncg.edu/university_policies/access...
- Please utilize the the consent form/information sheet with the most recent version date when enrolling participants.
- Please be aware that any changes to your protocol must be reviewed by the IRB prior to being implemented.

Sincerely,

UNCG Institutional Review Board