Clothing labels: Why are they important for sustainable consumer behaviour?

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Like food products, textiles and clothing are included among the basic groups of consumer goods. Concomitantly, the sector is strongly affected by environmental and social problems, occurring with variable intensity at the different stages of the clothing life cycle. Textiles are the fourth highest pressure category for primary raw materials and water after food, housing, and transport, and the fifth highest for greenhouse gas emissions.¹ The industry's finishing processes (dyeing, printing, and washing) consume large amounts of chemical substances. The industry is also strongly affected by social problems related to working conditions, child labor, and fair-trade principles.

The environmental and social impact is often difficult to assess in practice. Apparel production involves multiple players starting with the chemical industry and agriculture, fiber, finishing, fabric, and accessories manufacturers through to retailers, service operators, and the recycling industry which is gaining in importance. The situation is further complicated by the variety of raw materials and production methods used by the industry. This makes clothing manufacturing processes less transparent and much more difficult to trace compared with, for instance, food production. Most consumers lack sufficient knowledge or awareness to assess clothing product sustainability. A reliable assessment of clothing sustainability requires an investigation of the whole product life-cycle, because a positive aspect at one point in the value chain may have a negative impact on its later stages. For example, a product made of the most environmentally friendly raw material will still not be sustainable if environmentally harmful dyes are used at the finishing stage. In this respect, a product made of a water- and energy-efficient raw material may prove to be

highly ineffective during its employment phase (e.g. by using high washing temperatures for dirt removal). In addition, consumers may have a limited understanding of safe clothing and the potentially negative impact on their health and well-being. Given that a negative health impact is one of the most effective arguments for motivating buyers to make more rational choices, their unknowingness is another impediment for the development of sustainable consumption patterns in the clothing industry.

1 Clothing labels and their role towards a more sustainable industry

In view of the inherent specific and complex environmental and social issues of the clothing sector, there is a need to introduce concrete tools that will help consumers choosing products made with reduced environmental and social impacts throughout their production phases. One tool that provides this is product labeling. In the context of sustainability, we most frequently refer to eco- and social labels that are awarded by public and private organizations or by manufactures themselves to popularize and promote products that are socially or environmentally friendlier than the conventional ones. The most known ecological label is the one by ISO classified into three types (Koszewska 2019):

- Type I: a voluntary, multiple-criteria-based, third-party ecolabel;
- Type II: self-declared environmental claims developed by the producer without independent third-party certification;
- Type III: an environmental declaration based on quantified environmental data of a product and verified by a third party, more suitable for business-to-business communication.

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¹ EEA Briefing report 2019, <https://www.eea.europa.eu/themes/waste/resource-efficiency/textiles-in-europe-s-circular-economy>, Accessed 18 Jan 2021.

Type I ecolabels provide useful basic information for consumers (e.g., Global Organic Textile Standard [GOTS], European Ecolabel, Nordic Swan, and Blue Angel). These labels cover a wide range of criteria, namely raw materials (organic, Integrated Pest Management [IPM], recycled content), chemical substances (tested both on the final product and verified at production sites), durability by reference to performance benchmarks (e.g., dimensional change, color fastness, tensile and seam strength, water, dirt, and stain repellence, and flame retardancy) (Koszewska 2019).

A straightforward evaluation of eco- and social labels in fostering sustainable consumption patterns is not easy. Labels are a very important tool allowing identification of sustainable clothing, especially when the evaluation process includes both environmental and social criteria and the entire life-cycle. Labels can be an effective instrument enabling communication with consumers and are a possible major factor driving more responsible purchase decisions. A recognized label can be a key factor for consumers in their purchase decision, and boosting the willingness to pay a higher price (Koszewska 2016).

The latest Eurobarometer research has shown that a vast majority of EU consumers agree that not enough information is available about environmental problems and working conditions linked to clothing (82%) and that labeling should provide such information (86%). At the same time, most consumers (81%) agreed that although many products claim to be environmentally friendly, they do not trust this statement (Kantar 2019).

Despite their advantages, labels frequently cause confusion and frustration. The main reason for this is the rising number of labeling schemes, which makes it even more difficult for consumers to understand any differences between them, as they use significantly different criteria. The situation also facilitates so-called greenwashing.² In fact, consumers can only verify the particular label reliability by researching information about the criteria standing behind the label, and by understanding how and by whom their requirements are fulfilled and verified, which implies a lot of awareness and engagement from consumers.

Apart from voluntary eco- and social labels, there are also mandatory and industry practice labels. They refer to aspects such as fiber composition, care instructions, size information, and country of origin. This information is crucial especially in the context of circular economy where product durability, life span extension, energy and water conservation during use and also maintenance, take-back, and recycling systems are of particular importance.

2 Improvement potential, positive changes and future trends

There is room for improvement for the existing clothing labeling schemes. For mandatory labels, there is a need for better harmonization of the requirements between countries,³ and for moving towards extending the labels to include information about the country of origin, chemical substances (restriction on the use of some chemicals),⁴ wash/care instructions,⁵ environmental performance and material efficiency requirements in terms of durability, recyclability, repairability, reusability, and recyclable content⁶ (Bauer et al. 2018). An extension of advice about resource efficiency measures such as encouraging reuse and sharing would also be helpful.

In the case of currently voluntary ecological labels, the main challenge is the one already taken by EU, namely Building the Single Market for Green Products (COM/2013/0196 final), by developing a harmonized methodology for the calculation of the environmental footprint of products (PEF) and organizations (OEF) based on Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) methodology. For specific product categories, Product Environmental Footprint Category Rules (PEFCRs) provide detailed technical guidance on the way in which to conduct a PEF study. For textiles, the application of this methodology is currently limited to T-shirts but is planned to be expanded to further categories.

³ One of the problems is that labelling requirements for clothing products are not homogenous across countries, e.g. care labels. Although there are no required harmonized mandatory care instructions at the EU level, several member states require them to comply with the GINEX system as specified in ISO 3758. In the United States, care instructions can be provided either in words or in symbols (they must follow the ASTM system in the latter) (TÜV SÜD 2020).

⁴ Besides REACH regulation, same actions have been already taken by the largest textile manufacturers that formed a joint initiative to reduce the number of hazardous chemicals in their products by introducing ChemSec's Textile Guide (<https://echa.europa.eu/tools-for-the-textile-industry>).

⁵ The information could include recommendations on washing temperature, alternative detergents i.e. low temperature detergents, avoidance of fabric conditioners, reduced washing frequency, avoidance of tumble-dryers. The H&M and GINETEX have already developed a CleverCare symbol which is included on product labels and provides a link which users can follow to find tips on environmentally advantageous care and maintenance.

⁶ E.g., minimum recycled content by weight, number of washes a garment should be resilient to, the minimum number of times a zipper can be zipped without failing, a bill of materials or information on how a product can be disassembled. At the moment the existing regulation (EU) No 1007/2011 allows stating on a label or marking that a textile product is made up from recycled fibres; the use of the word "recycled" however must be kept separate from the declaration of fiber content.

² Environmental labels being frequently abused and counterfeited.

This approach offers labelling within a comparative scale (similar to the energy-labeling scale from A + + + to F), enabling communication of the relative environmental performance of products within the same category, allowing consumers to distinguish between clothing with greater versus smaller environmental impact, and encourage them to opt for products that are less harmful to the environment (Elsen et al. 2019).

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