

Session Cross-cutting: April 12th 11.30 hrs

5s3: Circular Textiles

CREDIBLE QUALITY INFORMATION AS A BOTTLENECK ISSUE IN EXTENDING CLOTHING LIFETIMES

Saramäki, Rinna 1)

1) Aalto University, Finland

Extending the active use time of clothes and consequently reducing the need for new production would alleviate the environmental impact of the clothing industry. Short active lifespan of clothes depends partly on consumers' decisions, and partly on the durability and technical quality of the clothes. Generally, consumers are not able to tell apart durable, good quality clothes and clothes that withstand only a short period of use. Consumers' lack of quality knowledge is a bottleneck issue that drives clothing consumption towards cheap prices at the expense of quality and durability, as price is clearly visible and understandable to consumers while quality is not. Even those consumers who would prefer to purchase durable clothes don't have the necessary knowledge to do so, and according to a survey conducted by me (n=667), many consumers would prefer to have impartial quality information to aid in purchase decisions. Credibly signalling clothing quality would benefit consumers, manufacturers of durable clothes, and the environment.

Some existing eco-labels have some demands on the durability of the products, but it's not the main focus. The main obstacles in creating a quality-focused eco-label are testing costs and the ambiguous nature of quality in textiles. Mere physical durability, measured for example by Martindale rub test or similar, does not adequately represent quality and potential garment lifespan. A well-made cashmere knit withstands less abrasion than a cheap acrylic knit, yet the first one is of better quality and most likely lasts longer in use and maintains its value – if cared for properly. According to Nancy Lutz (1989), there are two different circumstances of product quality related to consumer involvement. In a "substitute case", quality substitutes consumer care, such as sturdy outdoor pants. In a "complementary case", consumer care is integral in realising the quality potential of the product, such as a silk shirt. I propose a quality label system for clothes that acknowledges these two types of quality. It seeks to inform the consumer of clothes' potential durability. In the complementary case, it seeks to incentivise the consumer to care for the garment properly, extending its lifetime.

In the consumer survey, this proposition received an overwhelmingly positive response. Interviewing Finnish clothing companies, the response was positive especially from companies that produce clothes which need a special type of care and are higher priced (over 100€).

Keywords: eco-labeling, information asymmetry, signalling, clothing quality, extending clothing lifespan