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Sustainability as Social Contract: Textile and Apparel Professionals' Value Conflicts within the Corporate Moral Responsibility Spectrum

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Academic Editor: Bin Shen

Received: 27 September 2016; Accepted: 1 December 2016; Published: 7 December 2016

Abstract: Current discussions of sustainability in the textile and apparel (T&A) supply chain tend to focus on consumer behavior or methods of production. Few studies investigate how T&A supply chain members experience corporate sustainability initiatives within their own moral value spectrum. This study was designed to describe the gaps that might exist between personal and corporate moral values of T&A supply chain members, and how individuals manage such gaps to align personal and corporate identities. The researchers investigated the views of ten T&A supply chain members residing in the United States, both as employees and consumers of T&A companies, through semi-structured interviews. Dunfee's extant social contracts and Schwartz's theory of basic values were used as theoretical frameworks to better understand the participants' lived experiences in negotiating personal and corporate expectations. The findings revealed three themes: (a) nature of the value gap; (b) frustration due to the value gap; and (c) strategies to manage the value gap. The strategies used to realign values split into either those that held sustainability as their responsibility and worked to move corporate values toward their personal values; or those that shifted the blame to others so that their values could remain untouched.

Keywords: corporate sustainability; textile and apparel industry; moral values; social contract; value gap; employee and consumer identities

1. Introduction

As the textile and apparel (T&A) supply chain has become increasingly fractured across the world and corporations in recent decades due to the emphasis on low cost and rapid production [1,2], questions of corporate sustainability throughout the supply chain have increasingly surfaced from both consumers and researchers. Poor working conditions, unfair wages, and the negative environmental impacts of production and transportation cause concern for many [1,3,4], most of which stem from the overall sustainability of a T&A supply chain, from material selection and production location to retailers and end consumers. Thus, sustainability goals and activities can be just as fragmented as a supply chain, further complicating an understanding of corporate responsibility for sustainability [5]. In an industry moving forward after the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in 2013 killed over a thousand workers, this is especially critical to understand, as T&A corporations continue to engage in questionable sustainability practices, though both employees and consumers are more aware than ever of the safety concerns overseas.

At the same time, consumer and employee relationships with corporations are changing. According to a 2016 Gallup poll [6], USA millennials, born between 1980 and 1996, are less engaged with their jobs and more likely to look for employment opportunities that would provide a purpose

than are non-millennials. As consumers, only 25% of USA millennials are emotionally connected and loyal to specific brands and are more impulsive in their purchases than other generations of consumers are. In addition, a 2015 Nielsen survey [7] found that millennials are the generation most willing to spend more for sustainable products. These characteristics indicate that today's companies need to find new ways to attract and retain millennials, both in the workplace and the marketplace. Sustainability could be one way for companies to provide purpose and engagement with consumers and employees. The notion of engaging consumers and employees with sustainability is consistent with Ha-Brookshire and Hawley [8] who argued that satisfaction of individuals' clothing needs and wants is the objective of the T&A supply chain. This objective refers not only to consumers' social, biological, and aesthetic satisfaction, or employees' financial satisfaction, but also involves individuals' satisfaction when the supply chain responsibly meets these needs and wants while promoting "a better society and environment" [8] (p. 26). For this reason, the moral responsibility theory of corporate sustainability (MRCS) suggests that companies are morally responsible to be sustainable beyond stakeholder satisfaction [5].

To date, much research on corporate sustainability has focused on consumers' willingness to buy and support sustainable products, which have recognized price, quality, service, and when it comes to fashion products, style as critical factors towards adopting sustainable consumption practices [9–11]. In addition, the relationship between consumers' personal values and their purchase intention or brand loyalty has been a popular research topic, recognizing that, not only are above-mentioned factors important, but also value congruence between consumers and corporations may affect sustainable consumption practices or perceptions of a company's corporate sustainability activities [12–14]. At the same time, the management and business ethics literature suggests the congruence of employee-corporation values is critical for achieving an organization's goals, such as corporate sustainability. That is, due to employment being a form of social contract between employees and employers, both parties expect certain norms and behaviors from one another when accepting the contract [15]. Therefore, employees seek to identify what such norms are and make efforts to align the organizational and personal values around them [16].

If these findings are true, then what happens when consumers or employees have different values from those of corporations? Particularly, given that T&A supply chain members may also be consumers of their employers' products, they may experience a different level of corporate sustainability values as an employee than as a consumer. That is, as a consumer, they may see and hear their companies' sustainability values, yet behind closed doors, as an employee, they may experience different corporate values.

Given USA millennials' preference for purposeful jobs and careers, as well as consumption support for sustainable companies and products, an in-depth understanding of today's workforce professionals' experiences at the interplay of sustainability, corporate moral responsibility, and values would shed light onto how these supply chain members resolve and negotiate potential conflicts and gaps that might exist. In this light, the study was designed to explore T&A supply chain members' professional and consumer experiences through a lens of extant social contracts, Schwartz's theory of basic values, and corporate moral responsibility towards sustainability. The exploratory findings from this research were expected to lay a foundation for future large-scale empirical studies. Throughout this paper, corporate sustainability refers to the three pillars of sustainability, social equity, environmental integrity, and economic prosperity, within the corporate setting [17].

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

2.1. Moral Responsibility for Corporate Sustainability

The moral responsibility theory of corporate sustainability (MRCS) posits that for a supply chain to be truly sustainable, all members therein must adhere to common sustainability principles that stem from an assumed moral responsibility held by a corporation [5]. That is, the members, or individuals, must believe sustainability is a perfect duty of corporations if "true" sustainability were possible.

The theory states that perfect duties are rigid universal obligations that an individual or a corporation must follow in any eventuality. On the other hand, if individuals or corporations believe sustainability is an imperfect duty, then they will subjectively decide when and where to enact such sustainable initiatives or behaviors. Therefore, the theory suggests that a spectrum of sustainable corporations, based on their beliefs, ranges anywhere from always unsustainable to always sustainable corporations.

Prior research on organizational culture reinforces MRCS in that corporate sustainability can differ drastically in ideology and action based on the way the employer or organizational group has defined and exemplified the term [17]. Employees may recognize and adhere only to certain aspects of corporate sustainability, depending on how the corporate culture in which employees interact defines and presents corporate sustainability, both in word and action. Thus, it can be argued that a spectrum exists in how employees view both the concept of and their responsibility toward corporate sustainability. In addition, Constantinescu and Kaptein [18] argued that the moral responsibility of decisions made by corporations is not only attributed to the individuals within the corporation, but also to the corporation itself in that it defines strategies and procedures. However, the authors also suggested that this complex relationship between individual and corporate responsibility is not static, but rather each side can make an impact in a particular situation based on the behavior or culture that they reinforce [18].

Specifically within the T&A supply chain, de Brito et al. [19] found that, although they placed high importance on long-term economic sustainability in a healthy supply chain, the stakeholders were split into two groups when viewing corporate social and environmental responsibilities across the supply chain: (a) those that externalize responsibility; and (b) those that internalize responsibility. The authors argued that those who externalized social and environmental responsibility tended to shift the blame and solutions for sustainability to others, and therefore, did little more than put a bandage over the idea of sustainability, rather than address the core issue. However, those who internalized social and environmental responsibility seemed to seek creative solutions, open communication, and holistic approaches to address overall sustainability improvement within their supply chains [19]. Likewise, Pretious and Love [20] found that apparel retail buyers may vary, both within and across organizations, when it comes to enforcing their companies' codes of conduct. Some buyers saw the codes as rigid regulations and others saw them as flexible from situation to situation. The literature presented here suggests that how key stakeholders or corporate members view sustainability is an important factor for the overall sustainability performance of today's corporate supply chains, consistent with MRCS, yet the results might be inconsistent.

2.2. *Employee and Corporation: Social Contract*

From the employee-corporation relationship perspective in business ethics literature, Robertson and Crittenden [21] presented a moral philosophy model of cross-cultural societal ethics and posited that corporate characteristics such as culture, policies, and profit motives influence individual society members' moral behaviors, including those of employees. In fact, Press and Arnould [16] found that both employees and consumers compare a corporation's values to their own values in an ongoing effort to understand and identify with that corporation. They further explained that such comparisons are possible by constantly evaluating information through both "sensegiving" and "sensemaking" processes. Sensegiving includes formal communication about an organization's values directly from the source. Sensemaking involves informal channels of communication among employees or consumers, or even within the individual. These processes work in tandem to help individuals adopt values and exhibit behaviors that both create and emphasize organizational norms.

These studies on the relationship between individuals and corporations have critical implications for corporate employees' values and behaviors related to moral responsibility for corporate sustainability. Dunfee [15] argued that employment is a form of social contract between employees and employers and when accepting the contract, both employees and employers expect certain norms and behaviors from one another. Dunfee developed the concept of extant social contracts (ESCs), which he defined as, "existing social contracts embodying actual behavioral norms which derive from shared

goals, beliefs and attitudes of groups or communities of people” [15] (p. 32) and these ESCs are based on “the natural human tendency to organize into groups with shared values and goals” [15] (p. 26). Therefore, ESCs can inform the identification of right or wrong social standards and the standards then must be tested to determine whether or not they qualify as an overarching ethical norm.

While ESCs are often implied or considered informal, Dunfee [15] explained that formal codes of ethics, surveys, corporate or government speeches, reports from trade associations, and law suit proceedings are also sources of information on what standards a community or group holds. An obligation to comply can surface when “individuals either expressly consent to accept the norms of the social contract or they act (or fail to act) in such a manner as to signal consent” [15] (p. 37). Thus, the individuals themselves must agree to the norms for them to become obligations. According to Dunfee, conflicting or competing norms can cause difficulty in an individual’s compliance unless a means of prioritization is discovered. Negotiation or reconciliation is necessary to prioritize these conflicting or competing norms. Donaldson and Dunfee [22] further developed the concept of ESCs in the business environment when proposing the integrative social contracts theory (ISCT). ISCT has largely been used in a conceptual manner, and some believe that it may be limited in its applicability due to the dynamic nature of moral norms and the role of social actors [23]. However, it has been recognized as beneficial to understanding international business and ethics [24]. Thus, it has the potential to provide a framework for empirical studies of moral values between individuals and multi-national corporations.

2.3. Consumers and Corporations

From the consumer-corporation perspective, in his study on product symbolism and human values, Allen [13] discovered that individuals did prefer products that symbolize human values that aligned with their own beliefs and were less likely to purchase products that symbolize human values that diverged from their own beliefs. In addition, he found that the individual’s predisposition to be mindful of human values in their daily life affected the strength of this interplay. Furthermore, individuals’ assignment of values was found to be based on an ideal self-concept more than their actual self-concept and therefore actual behavior [13]. Additionally, Lee, Park, Rapert, and Newman indicated that the more a consumer perceives their personal values align with a company’s values, the more positively they view that company’s corporate sustainability message [12].

Rokeach [25] defined a human value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (p. 5). According to Rokeach, these are broken out into: (a) instrumental values, which specifically tie to preferred behavior; and (b) terminal values, which specifically describe or indicate a final state of being for an individual, community, or group. Instrumental values include self-control, logic, independence, and politeness. Terminal values include happiness, equality, peace, and freedom. Rokeach further differentiated moral values as particular instrumental, or mode of conduct, values “that have an interpersonal focus which, when violated, arouse pangs of conscience or feelings of guilt for wrongdoing” [25] (p. 8). Moral values include being honest, responsible, loving, or helpful.

Schwartz [26] further developed the idea of personal values and identity as they relate to social organization in his theory of basic values. The ten basic, universal values he identified are self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism. According to Schwartz’s theory, each individual prioritizes these values in different ways from one another and from one situation to the next, weighing according to the overall personal goal that a value represents and the way it relates to other values in that situation. In addition, choosing an attitude or behavior that supports one value often puts another value at risk. Thus, attempting to reconcile values can be extremely challenging for individuals who encounter various social settings and individuals in their daily routine. They must find ways to prioritize and justify their values to themselves in each instance. Finally, social norms can be subject to approval or rejection based on an individual’s goals and the values that uphold those goals [26]. Prior research has used Schwartz’s

value theory to understand consumers' motivations for sustainable consumption [27], how values affect behavior toward sustainability [28], and how cultural and socio-economic norms and values affect students' views of corporate social responsibility efforts [29]. The theory still has the potential for clarifying the process of negotiation and prioritization that individuals undergo when faced with competing values toward sustainability.

Conflicting values between consumers and corporations are the subject of a study by Carrington et al. [30] that recognized a situation of "unmanageable multiplicity" when ethical consumers are forced to make unethical choices in the marketplace, as well as in other life roles. This moral dilemma would lead to feelings of frustration or guilt. As the authors described, some consumers identified the reason for such feelings and worked to realign their consumption activities, and other life activities, with their moral values. Ethical consumers in their study recognized the realignment as an ongoing journey that constantly works to develop their ideal moral self. In restoring their identities in the marketplace, they would make efforts to avoid certain brands, stores, ingredients, or quantities based on what consumption issues resonated with them. However, other life roles, such as financial situation or partner preferences, were found to force a compromise in some consumption decision-making, even if it meant straying from their moral ideal [30].

Additionally, consumption, and its relationship with corporate sustainability, can be viewed as a social contract, as Russell et al. [31] explain. When consumers recognize that a corporation has not met its formal or informal social contract regarding environmental or social sustainability, they can respond with emotions such as anger or disgust, in addition to individual or collective actions against the corporation. These actions can include personal or collective boycotting of a brand, legal action against a company, signing petitions, or speaking out against a corporation to their personal network. The study went on to discover that consumers moderate their response to a broken corporate sustainability contract based on their level of sustainability awareness, in addition to the type of contract that was violated. If the contract was an informal promise to its consumers, consumers with lower levels of sustainability awareness are likely to enact individual measures such as privately boycotting the corporation. If the contract was formal and/or government-regulated, highly aware consumers are more likely to respond with collective action against the corporation [31].

2.4. Research Questions

If morality is tied to interpersonal behavior, as Rokeach [25] describes, then corporate moral values are tied to employees' and consumers' personal moral values, as individuals interact in the workplace or the marketplace on a daily basis. For example, prior research has shown that a correspondence between an employee's moral development level and their organization's ethical climate level can lead to increased job satisfaction and workplace commitment, and decreased employee turnover [32]. However, when there is a discrepancy between personal and corporate values, employees are forced to negotiate or reconcile the discrepancy by prioritizing conflicting or competing norms [15,26]. Similarly, a consumer's moral development level could affect their relationship with a brand or product, depending on how their ideal moral identity conflicts or aligns with the moral identity that brand or product represents [30].

However, little is known about potential discrepancies between the values of corporations and those of individuals who are simultaneously their employees and consumers, as well as how any such discrepancies are reconciled. Given that today's T&A supply chain is a truly international environment, it is more likely that competing norms across political, cultural, or economic spheres will surface and challenge ethical values and norms [21,24]. In addition, T&A products are consumed by all human beings, giving opportunity to T&A supply chain members to be producers and consumers at the same time. Therefore, this study was designed to explore the perceptions of employees and consumers toward moral responsibility for corporate sustainability within the T&A supply chain. Specifically, given that both Dunfee's social contract theory [15] and Schwartz's theory of basic values [26] emphasize that an individual's prioritization and renegotiation of norms or values is necessary in any given situation, the study focused on determining what the interactions between individuals and corporations look like within these frameworks that allows for the negotiation of gaps

between each other's values. Therefore, two major research questions were formulated: (a) What do gaps in values toward corporate sustainability look like between individuals (who are both employees and consumers) and textile and apparel corporations? (b) How do these individuals cope with and respond to such gaps?

3. Methods

3.1. Qualitative Interview Approach

The researchers used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the research questions. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, in-depth interviews allow the researcher to best capture participants' views through their own words and experiences rather than assuming elements of a new, little researched topic. In addition, qualitative investigation allows researchers to better understand relationships among nuanced pieces of a process so that a more complete picture or theory can be formed [33]. As topics of moral responsibility for sustainability and individuals' values can be sensitive, the primary researcher employed an open-ended, conversational tone in the interviews to put participants at ease.

3.2. Participant Selection

Using criterion sampling to ensure the research goals were addressed [33], the participants were identified as both employees in the T&A supply chain and individual consumers of T&A products in the United States who may have experienced a gap in values toward corporate sustainability. In order to gather sufficient details and reflections on the research goals, the participants were required to have a minimum of two years of experience in the T&A industry in a corporate setting, beyond self-employment. In an effort to gain a diverse and in-depth picture of consumer and employee perceptions, the sampling technique aimed to include individuals from varied ages, genders, geographic areas, and job roles. Participants were recruited through both convenience and referral, as those known by the primary researcher and then through individuals in the researcher's network who recommended other appropriate participants. The researchers determined the total sample size by interviewing until a saturation of major themes was met.

Both researchers have past professional experience, within textile science, global sourcing, product management, customer service, and retail roles. The primary researcher also knew two of the participants well and was the acquaintance of two others. All but two of the remaining six participants were recommended by mutual acquaintances. As such, past professional experiences and connections with many participants added to the researcher's ability to establish rapport during the interviews and elicit potentially sensitive information that otherwise may not have been shared. This rapport and the private spaces participants chose for their interviews all contributed to minimizing social desirability bias in responses. Some participants even made this clear by indicating the private nature of what they were saying, such as asking, "you cannot share the names, right?" Other participants were drawn by the topic itself, indicating their willingness to share openly, which was reaffirmed by stating they were highly interested in seeing the study once it was finished, or indicating strong support of the study in pre- or post-interview comments. The types of responses provided in the findings below also indicate that participants were comfortable speaking openly on the sensitive topics.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Once the Institutional Review Board approved the research study in January 2016, the primary researcher interviewed 10 textile and apparel supply chain members currently performing roles in merchandising, technical design, sustainability, product development, retail management, and textile science for companies in the United States, from Massachusetts, California, Pennsylvania, Missouri, and New York. Two participants out of 10 were male, while the remaining eight were female. Six of 10 participants fell within the millennial generation. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms in this study. Demographic information is available in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race or Ethnicity	Marital Status	Geographic Location	Highest Level Education	Years in Industry	Current Title	Employer
Jill	31	F	Caucasian	Single	California	Bachelor's	5	Merchandise Planner	Men's and Women's Apparel Retailer
Marie	34	F	Caucasian	Married	Massachusetts	Master's	8	Senior Product Development Engineer	Textile Producer
Leah	32	F	Caucasian	Married	New York	Bachelor's	9	Freelance Technical Designer	Luxury Apparel Brand
Tara	30	F	Caucasian	Single	California	Bachelor's	8	Materials Researcher	Outdoor Apparel Brand
Sue	37	F	Caucasian	Single	California	Bachelor's	15	Textile Lab Manager	Outdoor Apparel Brand
Paul	55	M	Asian-American	Married	California	Master's	20	Vice President, Sustainability	Men's and Women's Apparel Brand
Pam	28	F	Caucasian	Single	Pennsylvania	Master's	3.5	Associate Buyer	Women's Apparel Retailer
Nikki	38	F	Caucasian	Single	California	Master's	15	Director, Product Development	Apparel Producer
Ray	26	M	African-American	Single	Missouri	Bachelor's	3	Retail Manager and Freelance Stylist	Women's Apparel Retailer
Kelly	37	F	Caucasian	Married	Missouri	Bachelor's	15	Director of Technical Design	Women's Apparel Retailer

While the sample size was relatively small, the fact that it was a group of industry professionals from across the country in a wide variety of professional roles provides rich expert voice testimony of the topics being investigated. In addition, the participants had anywhere from three to 20 years of experience, with the majority (7 of 10) having over five years of industry experience. Those who have in depth experience with the process or phenomenon under investigation, such as those in this study, are the most capable of providing valid opinions and experiences [33]. Other exploratory studies of sustainability within the T&A industry [19,20] have also employed this approach, focusing on those in professional roles familiar with the phenomenon.

The primary researcher informed participants of the study's purpose and method and ensured that they understood there were no right or wrong answers to questions asked. Once the researchers received verbal consent, the majority of interviews were conducted as video calls via Skype or Facetime, with the exception of one phone interview and two face-to-face interviews. The participants chose the location that was most comfortable for them in which to speak. Six out of 10 participants were located in their homes; one in a café; two in participants' offices; and one in the participant's car. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 min in length and were audio-recorded. The interviews began with broad questions, such as, "how did you come to work in the textile and apparel industry?" or, "what does corporate moral responsibility mean to you?" The questions increasingly narrowed to discuss value conflicts in the workplace or marketplace that they may have experienced. Such questions included, "were there ever any tasks that you did or topics that came up that made you feel uncomfortable about what you had to do to complete your job?" or, "what do you think when you're in a consumer frame of mind and you hear negative things about brands or retailers that you might be interested in?" or, "if you were to leave your current employer, what would you look for in companies that you would want to work with?"

The primary researcher transcribed interviews verbatim as they were completed and utilized the information garnered to assist in shaping subsequent interviews. The second researcher reviewed the transcripts as they were completed. To ensure dependability and confirmability [34], both researchers analyzed the data for major recurring themes separately before discussing findings.

4. Results and Discussion

While organizing data in initial coding and referring back to the research questions, major themes emerged from the interviews. These themes represent to some extent the way that participants made sense of the T&A industry and how they configured their personal or employee identities therein. The researchers organized the themes into three distinct categories of T&A supply chain members' sustainability-related moral value conflicts with corporations: (a) the nature of the gap between their personal values and those of corporations; (b) feelings of frustration; and (c) the coping strategies resulting from their frustration.

Within the categories, subthemes emerged related to a pivotal attitude or behavior that directed participants' recognition and management of the gap between personal and corporate values. While only a few participants seemed to exhibit the gap between personal and employee values in their current work environment, most of them shared that they had experienced conflicts in prior employment situations. These results thus take into account both existing and prior conflicts because they both provide examples of value gaps and management strategies. In addition, current and past experiences are all part of the process each individual goes through in continual self-identity creation and negotiation to uphold moral values [16,30]. The themes that emerged supported the concept of conflicting values and value or norm prioritization in daily interactions, as discussed by Dunfee [15] and Schwartz [26].

See Figure 1 for the conceptual model that emerged from the data. In the conceptual model, the second ring illustrates the value gap between corporate values and personal values toward corporate sustainability that the study participants experienced. By utilizing the coping strategies included in the second ring, the participants shared that they attempt, consciously or unconsciously,

to make sense of the gap by bringing their values and those of the corporation closer together in some way. The dotted lines indicate that both sets of values and the gap itself are porous and may change in various situations.

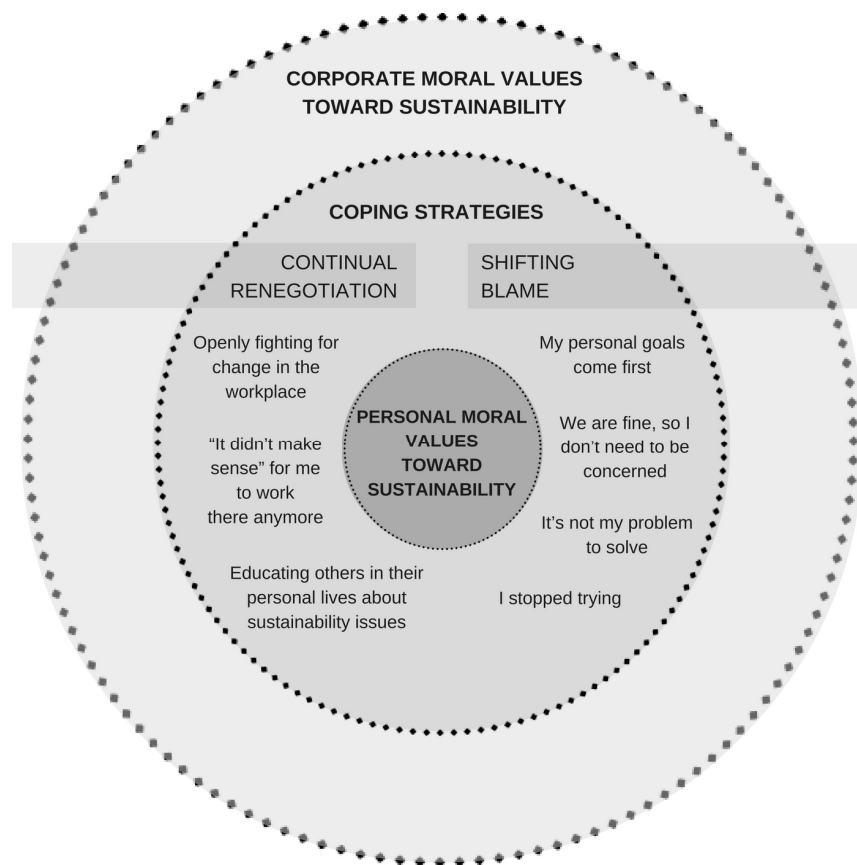


Figure 1. Textile and Apparel Professionals’ Strategies in Managing Value Gaps Related to Corporate Sustainability. Conceptual model that emerged from the study data.

4.1. Theme Category 1: The Value Gap

In this study, two themes emerged describing the nature of the moral value gaps and conflicts that participants have experienced or are currently experiencing. The participants shared that they experienced an internal struggle due to such gaps between their personal moral values and those of corporations within the T&A supply chain. These gaps then seemed to shape their views of the nature of the industry and its responsibility towards social and environmental sustainability. The two themes were: (a) corporate sustainability is “a moral dilemma” for everyone in the industry; and (b) being a consumer of irresponsible companies’ products is “a tough pill to swallow”.

These gaps align with Rokeach’s idea that personal moral values, including honesty, responsibility, and helpfulness, can cause guilt if they conflict with other values that the individual may hold [25]. As Schwartz [26] describes, an individual’s values come into conflict with one another on a daily basis, in many circumstances. Guilt and moral unease can be seen in the themes below, as a result of these conflicts.

4.1.1. Corporate Sustainability Is “a Moral Dilemma” for Everyone in the Industry

Nikki, director of product development for an apparel producer, is a passionately concerned consumer, employee, and teacher. She does not shy away from vocalizing her concerns to others and recognizes that working in the apparel industry is challenging for someone with her values. She admits

that corporate sustainability is a dilemma for everyone in the industry as a business's "first priority is to make profit" and the business expects employees' decisions to be led by that:

When it boils down to the apparel industry, we're a global industry, selling garments to people who don't make a lot of money. And to be able to make the price points that they want to pay for things, we find ourselves going overseas for production and materials. And in the big picture, that's difficult to manage. It takes a lot of resources, time and people... And ... if you don't trust those people wholly ... It's one of the biggest challenges I feel. ... if you're not in it for the money and don't care what happens, it's a moral dilemma for everybody who works in the industry that I know, as well. [Nikki, see Table 1]

Similarly, Tara, a materials researcher formerly with an outdoor apparel brand, also experienced gaps in what she believes to be environmentally responsible as a materials researcher and what materials her former employer was prepared to invest time and resources into developing. She shared that she is personally committed to sustainability, as both an employee and a consumer. As a result, she has been very careful in selecting from whom she shopped and for whom she worked. Tara wanted to be able to earn her salary by working for companies in which she could exercise her personal moral values. Outdoor apparel companies are typically concerned with environmental protection and she made a conscious decision to work for such a company, hoping that she could align both personal and corporate values in her every day working environment. Even in this setting, the sensegiving corporate communication that initially attracted her did not resonate with the sensemaking opportunities she experienced in her everyday work life [16] and Tara found that value gaps still exist:

You'd go to the product leaders and you'd say, 'look, I have this, this new sustainable way of giving a moisture management property to a fabric versus traditional.' And they'd say, 'okay, well is it better?' And you'd say, 'yes. Yes, it's more sustainable.' 'Well, no, does it perform better?' 'Uh, well, it pretty much meets performance, it's you know apples to apples.' 'Okay, well, we don't want it.' And especially, the next question is always, 'Does it cost more?' And it wasn't worth it for them to pay more. [Tara, see Table 1]

4.1.2. Being a Consumer of Irresponsible Companies' Products Is "a Tough Pill to Swallow"

The second gap highlights participants' internal conflicts that they experience as consumers. Participants shared that they were conflicted between what they know about the industry and what is available or affordable for them to purchase. As Leah, a freelance technical designer for luxury apparel brands, states below, sometimes she feels backed into a corner in the consumer marketplace. More often than she would like, she has to buy products from a large global company that she knows does not support local jobs and caused the closure of several local apparel companies. She personally knows the sadness and helplessness that the local businesses went through as she used to work with them directly as vendors before they closed. However, she feels that for certain products she cannot avoid buying from this large company and is not able to support local businesses as often as she would like:

It kind of makes it difficult for me, like a tough pill for me to swallow, to purchase those things ... that I know are made by that company [intermediate for fashion retailers] ... I do, because unfortunately in certain circumstances you have no choice. Because they own such a tremendous stake of what we're buying. [Leah, see Table 1]

4.2. Theme Category 2: Frustration

Participants shared that social contracts between employer and employee, or consumer and corporation have been fractured or violated, resulting in feelings of great frustration. This frustration seemed to manifest in three themes: (a) I feel "bummed out" when unable to practice moral values at work; (b) as a consumer, "I roll my eyes at" companies' sustainability claims; and (c) as an industry, "I wish we were more proactive" in addressing sustainability.

4.2.1. I Feel “Bummed out” When I Am Unable to Practice My Moral Values at Work

Within the realm of employment, participants felt frustrated when their attempts to recognize or reconcile their values led to naught. Whether it was in seeing the profit-focused approach of the company preventing their attempts at sustainable projects, or in struggling to find support within their team, participants said that they were dissatisfied with their employers’ or coworkers’ responses. This emotional response is consistent with the “frustration, disappointment, resentment, guilt, and regret” found in a prior study of consumers who strongly identified with ethical values as they struggled to find ethical goods in the marketplace [30] (p. 1312).

Tara felt that her prior employer, which had a strong environmental focus in its mission, continually thwarted her attempts as a materials researcher to push sustainability projects forward. As a result, she came to the disappointing realization that even sustainably-focused companies within the industry were not as altruistic as she had hoped:

To the consumer, [prior employer] appears like it’s doing so much for sustainability and they talk about it a LOT. And being behind the scenes and trying to institutionalize programs and put things in front of people—that was really frustrating for me. Because I felt like they would only do it if they could tell a story about it [to consumers], not because it was the right thing to do. And that’s when the rose-colored glasses came off and I started . . . understanding the industry a little bit more, [. . .] I got pretty bummed out. [Tara, see Table 1]

Some participants indicated that they did have a workplace forum to voice suggestions for corporate sustainability. At first, such opportunities seemed exciting as they thought the company leaders would listen and do something about it, providing a way to reinforce corporate values by collaboratively acting on sustainability ideas [18]. However, they shared that they felt their suggestions continually came up against resistance within the company, whether it was due to workplace bureaucracy or managers’ priorities. As Pam, an associate buyer for a women’s apparel retailer describes, she hits a wall every time she proposes new community engagement activities and it makes her feel frustrated:

I do have certain [corporate social responsibility] meetings where I can say, ‘oh, this [community outreach] is a good idea.’ But again, there’s all this sort of ‘red tape’ that goes into it . . . our ideas nine times out of 10 just don’t happen. Just because it’s such a large company that it has to go through legal, it has to go through this and that, before anything can even happen. And then it just never does. [Pam, see Table 1]

4.2.2. As a Consumer, “I Roll My Eyes at” Companies’ Sustainability Claims

Participants unanimously described a sense of distrust or lack of confidence with T&A companies’ claims of or attempts towards sustainability. This distrust suggests a glaring crack in corporations’ attempts to keep and fulfill a social contract with consumers, as the consumers did not feel the promise made by the corporation was being upheld in any real way [31]. As a result, the consumers did not feel that they needed to consent to the proposed contract by purchasing that sustainable product or brand [15]. While many participants pointed out specifically that their lack of confidence in claims stemmed from the knowledge that they gained by working within the industry or being educated about the industry in college, it still shows a point of major concern in moving sustainable consumption forward in the future.

Jill, a merchandise planner for a licensed apparel retailer, said that, “Not off the top of my head, no [I can’t think of a morally responsible apparel brand]. I just feel like they’re all kind of bad.” Similarly, Ray, a retail manager for a women’s apparel retailer, expressed distrust in apparel brands in general when it came to sustainability:

I think it's all a cover up [when I see ads about sustainability from apparel companies], you know. 'Oh, we're doing a sustainable line.' Okay, well that's nice, but why don't we make everything sustainable? 'No, let's just have this little line, this little collection over here that's sustainable.' ... I just kind of, roll my eyes at it. [Ray, see Table 1]

Marie, a product development engineer for a textile producer, described her frustration with claims made by a supposedly-sustainable apparel brand. In her current job role, she has had the opportunity to have high-level interactions with the brand as one of their vendors. She confessed that she had previously been very interested in supporting this company as a consumer, because of its sustainability focus. She had even considered working for them in the past. However, once she saw what was truly happening behind the scenes, she lost confidence in the company's claims and her social contract with them is now damaged by her disappointment:

This was a brand that I thought was a really good brand ... They have so many things to say, they want to do this and that. You know, good for the environment, good for jobs in the United States, blah, blah, blah. And then not a single one of these things ever plays out. They're just constantly looking for cheaper, cheaper, cheaper, which means that they're not buying things from the United States, they're not setting up things in the United States. They're touting these ideals; they're not actually doing any of these things ... They're kind of a disappointment from what they say to what they actually play out and do in real life. [Marie, see Table 1]

4.2.3. As an Industry, "I Wish We Were More Proactive" in Addressing Sustainability

Those that experienced frustration did not limit their concerns to their day-to-day situations. The struggle extended to their overall perceptions of the T&A supply chain and how it has addressed sustainability. Four participants shared that the gaps between their personal moral values and those of corporations could be greatly reduced if the industry as a whole becomes more proactive and collaborative. As such, they do believe that sustainability is a moral responsibility for corporations to fulfill, as Ha-Brookshire [5] argued. As Sue, a lab manager at an outdoor apparel brand, describes, workers and their work environment "should be" companies' responsibility and an industry-wide level of commitment is necessary for a sustainable future:

Companies should [with an emphasis] have responsibility to their employees and companies should [with an emphasis] really care about the environment that their people are working in and what they're exposed to. [...] As a consumer and as an employee of these companies, I wish that more big companies would put their money where their mouth is. And I wish there was more collaboration. I wish that more people would join forces to accomplish what we all want to get done, instead of it being brand by brand. [...] Usually something bad has to happen, like these fires in Bangladesh, for these companies to create these coalitions. And I wish it was more proactive. And we know it's bad. You know, I think there's nothing that people don't [with an emphasis] know about at this point. [Sue, see Table 1]

4.3. Theme Category 3: Coping Strategies

Once frustration set in, participants indicated that they use different types of coping mechanisms to attempt to make sense of the dissatisfying or broken social contract, either in employment or consumption. Two main coping themes surfaced among the participants: (a) continual renegotiation to close the gap in moral values; and (b) shifting blame. Within each theme, specific methods of coping, or subthemes, were identified and many participants employed more than one of the methods at a time. The coping strategies also illustrated the participants' attempts to prioritize personal values in their daily activities so that the conflicting values could be more consistently aligned, as described by Schwartz [26].

In addition, the coping methods utilized by participants can further aid in determining where on the morality spectrum an individual may lie. As Ha-Brookshire [5] describes, at one end are those that

are truly sustainable and seem to view sustainability as a perfect duty. At the other end of the spectrum are those that are occasionally sustainable in selective areas and view sustainability as an imperfect duty. Those that fight on a daily basis to align their moral values related to corporate sustainability could be seen as closer to truly sustainable. Those that give up or shift blame to other entities could be seen as closer to occasionally sustainable in selective areas. Similarly, the results were consistent with de Brito et al. [19] in that supply chain stakeholders fell into two categories, those that internalize responsibility for corporate sustainability, and their own circumstances, and those that externalize it.

4.3.1. Continual Renegotiation to Close the Gap

Some participants described actively working to close the gap they recognized between their personal moral values and those of corporations. Even those who had experienced value gaps with prior employers, but not as clearly with present employers, continued to keep their personal moral values at the forefront, in an effort not to relapse into a similar situation. These participants employed three behaviors to renegotiate the value gap: (a) “it didn’t make sense” for me to work there anymore; (b) vocally fighting for change in the workplace; and (c) educating others in their personal lives about sustainability issues within the industry, because “we all should know better”.

“It Didn’t Make Sense” for Me to Work There Anymore

Six of the 10 participants described leaving employers or making future decisions about employment based on their moral values. They were interested in finding employers that made them feel better about the kind of work they do and matched their own beliefs. All six were passionate about their job roles and were not interested in leaving the industry if they could help it, but had a difficult time finding an employer that aligned with their values. One participant even had tears in her eyes when expressing her serious consideration of leaving the industry to work for a company in another industry that was a better fit for her values toward corporate sustainability.

Confirming what Ambrose et al. [32] found in their research on employee-organization fit, those participants who left jobs as a result of a moral value conflict seemed to have higher levels of moral development in general. Nikki, a director of product development for a women’s apparel producer, was concerned about the gap between what she believed was morally responsible and what the industry represented, prompting her, in the past, to reconsider ever working in the T&A supply chain again. She has since gone back into the industry for a company whose values are better aligned with her personal moral values.

Likewise, Tara, a materials researcher, left her longtime position with an outdoor apparel brand because with management changes, “sustainability was no longer a priority. So, a lot of the projects were dropping in priority and . . . for me, it didn’t make sense to stay there anymore”. As a result, she spends time heavily in researching potential employers with the goal of working for a company that is more proactive about sustainability. Tara has even considered leaving the T&A supply chain all together, though she said that with a heavy heart. As a result, she has volunteered her time with a T&A non-profit organization that aligns with her moral values toward sustainability, hoping that it will develop into a paid position in the near future. She said that her experience with the non-profit organization makes her “feel really good about myself. Because I feel like I’m doing something for the textile industry that is really putting sustainability at the forefront”.

Vocally Fighting for Change at Work

Sustainably-focused participants who chose to stay with an employer despite a gap between their personal and corporate moral values attempted to enact change in the workplace to close that gap (4 of 10). Even though Tara felt jaded with her prior employer’s lack of commitment to sustainability, she did not give up in attempting to ensure her sustainability projects’ success while she was there. She worked hard to find the resources needed and get people excited about the projects, even when she did not have management support.

I made sure I found every ally within that business. [. . .] I would go around to most of the people and I would find those that cared and were willing to do a little extra work outside of the box, and that was the most successful way of getting anything done. Is getting people passionate about something, and sustainability is a great way to do that, and then they're willing to go. They're willing to put the time in. And then that made it a lot more successful. [Tara, see Table 1]

Similarly, Nikki, a director of product development for a start-up apparel producer, is not shy about telling her employer when she disagrees with how their decisions may affect a community or even an individual. As she only went back into the T&A supply chain because she found a like-minded company to work for, she no longer allows inroads into her moral values in the process. Therefore, she speaks out:

My CEO is very involved in getting one of those robotic sewing machines, and my first thought was, 'well, where are you giving money to support people who will be displaced with that?' And I say it straight to his face, 'I do not support that if we do not support people getting jobs. And even if we weren't displacing people with a robotic sewing machine, how do we still help people, with the success that we are having here?' [Nikki, see Table 1]

Educating Others about the Industry, Good or Bad, because "We All Should Know Better"

More than half of the participants indicated that they felt a need to share their knowledge about the industry's sustainability concerns or efforts with friends, family, or acquaintances. Sue, a textile lab manager, who has many friends who are passionate about social and political issues, feels internal pressure to speak out about issues in the T&A supply chain in an attempt to reconcile her personal and professional identities. As she says, "sometimes [I feel inspired to share negative information that I come across about brands] . . . more from like a shame aspect. You know of just, we all should know better".

From another perspective, Kelly, a director of technical design for a women's apparel retailer, felt the need to share the realities of the T&A supply chain with those in her personal life who are skeptical. Though she is a self-described "skeptic" when she is in the marketplace, she felt that people sometimes painted an unreasonably negative image of the industry and she could help them be better informed about the facts. In this way, she tries to reconcile how the industry's values are portrayed with what she feels is important by moving the two closer to one another. "I think that people always have a negative [image of our industry]. I know I've talked about this with colleagues. You almost have to sell the industry to [those outside of the it]."

4.3.2. Shifting Blame

The second coping mechanism involved participants finding ways to shift responsibility outside of the individual sphere. In doing this, they externalized responsibility for sustainability within their industry, as described by de Brito et al. [19]. Four subthemes emerged in shifting blame: (a) my personal goals come first; (b) we are fine, so I do not need to be concerned; (c) it is not my problem to solve; and (d) I stopped trying.

My Personal Goals Come First

In the first level of shifting blame, participants cited constraints within their personal life as preventing them from actively engaging in moral responsibility efforts in the workplace or marketplace. The most common justification was that they simply did not have time to research sustainability issues or brands, or enact initiatives in the workplace. Four participants explicitly indicated that they were interested in sustainability issues in the industry, but only insofar as the information made its way to them without their active effort; they did not spend time seeking out the information themselves. On the consumer side, Jill, a merchandise planner, indicated that she would not spend her time looking up brands to ensure they are sustainably produced. Not only would she not spend the time on it,

but she believed it was unlikely that consumers in general would do it, further justifying her position. “You have to go to their website and read about them. And that’s a lot of work for the average consumer. No one does that. No one does that at all.”

The second rationalization was their need to focus on their career, either their need to develop new skills and advance in their positions, or their need to have a job at all in a difficult market. Leah, a freelance technical designer, who has had value conflicts with prior employers, would like to work with more responsible companies, but finds it difficult to locate employers who fit that description. Nevertheless, she tried to justify the situation, describing that, “You kind of have to go where you can . . . to gain the experience to move on. So, it’s very difficult to have the feelings of, am I really working for a company that I believe in?”

We Are Fine, so I Do Not Need to Be Concerned

Next, participants mentioned that they, or others they knew, are concerned about sustainability issues only if their company, friends, or family are involved. If the company or close acquaintance was not involved with a sustainability situation, then they no longer needed to be concerned with the issue, or proactive in combatting it. Paul, a vice president of sustainability for an apparel brand, described that many people did not want to concern themselves with the ramifications of human rights’ or environmental violations unless they knew someone directly affected by it.

[Moral issues in the industry don’t] come up in everyday conversation [outside of work] unless there’s a big issue or a big media story or something like that. I mean in terms of my family, they know what I do and they say, ‘oh, there was something that happened in Bangladesh, right? You guys don’t source there, do you?’... I think most people want to know, ‘So what are you doing, what does your company do to make sure you’re not in that situation?’ . . . I rarely hear that people are going to boycott a certain company. [Paul, see Table 1]

Likewise, Sue a textile lab manager, described how she and other coworkers felt when tragedies happened in Bangladesh, “you wanted to make sure, one, that I wasn’t working for a company that was doing that.” Once she was certain her company was not a part of the issue, she could relax her concern a little and feel like her values were still aligned with those of her employer, to some extent.

It Is Not My Problem to Solve

To some participants, pushing responsibility completely off of their own plate, onto a larger governmental, industry-wide, or company-wide agenda, seemed to be the best way to cope. In so doing, they could say, “it’s not my problem to solve” and still feel like their values are not compromised. As Marie, a product development engineer says, she can enact small behaviors in her daily life around her moral values, like choosing which retailer or brand to support, but she would not push it beyond that level. She did not feel it was her responsibility to change the conversation about a company; it was up to government to monitor and regulate corporate moral responsibility:

Yeah, I would definitely pick one retailer over another. Whether I’m going to speak out against those that are doing things incorrectly, no. That’s a huge elephant of a problem. You know, that’s more of a legislative and governmental issue, because it’s massive. [Marie, see Table 1]

In the workplace, Jill, a merchandise planner, felt that her company set up the organization to have separate responsibilities for different teams, and that addressing social or environmental concerns was not her responsibility. Not only did she think her team was kept away from the sourcing teams to limit the conversation around corporate sustainability, but she did not think that she could or should address it in her role. As Jill said, “that’s not the part of the business [sustainable production practices] that I deal with. And so, I don’t even know who I would talk to about that, to be honest.”

I Stopped Trying

Some (3 of 10) participants indicated that in the past they made some efforts to better align moral values with those of an employer, but that it does not lead to progress. As a result, they stopped trying to gather information or start a conversation and instead shifted the blame onto their unresponsive employer or coworker. Consistent with Linnenluecke and Griffiths [17], employees take their cues on corporate sustainability from the culture and behavior they witness in their employer. Thus, if it seems that their coworkers are not making an effort, why should they? As Jill, a merchandise planner for a licensed apparel retailer, describes, she used to be more curious about where her company's products were made, but after short or vague responses from coworkers, she no longer probes further:

Occasionally, I'll be like, 'oh, where was this made?' And they'll be like, 'oh, China, or wherever, India.' But [I don't ask] really beyond that. We're bad [...] at this point, I just assume that's where we were able to get the best cost. [Jill, see Table 1]

In Pam's case, she previously had a good relationship with her direct manager, but with the arrival of a new manager, support for her concerns, sustainably-focused or not, has all but disappeared. With the social contract between Pam and her employer reduced to this negative interaction, it has worn down her efforts to push concerns forward, and she no longer tries to fight for her values past an initial confrontation:

If my manager doesn't agree with my stuff, it just ... doesn't happen. You know, it all gets squashed. [...] So my manager right now, anytime that we talk about [my concerns on a project] she'll say, 'yeah, that's the least of my worries.' It's like, 'Okay, well, I kind of care about it, but whatever.' [Pam, see Table 1]

5. Conclusions

Current discussions on sustainability tend to focus on consumer behavior or methods of production. However, within the realm of corporate sustainability, employees and consumers along the T&A supply chain experience struggles to align their moral values with those of corporations. Therefore, the study's goal was to better understand any disparities in individuals' moral values as they relate to corporate sustainability and how they manage any gaps to align their personal and corporate identities. To this end, the researchers investigated the views of 10 T&A supply chain members, who are both employees and consumers of T&A product companies, garnered through semi-structured interviews.

The findings revealed three major theme categories: (a) nature of the value gap; (b) frustration due to the value gap; and (c) strategies to manage the value gap. The strategies used to realign personal and corporate identities split into either those that held sustainability as their responsibility and worked hard to move corporate values toward their own personal values; or those that shifted the blame, and therefore the responsibility for sustainability, to others so that their own values could remain untouched.

The study contributes to existing research by expanding the use of extant social contract and integrative social contract theory to the ideas of moral values, employment, and consumption relationships in the T&A supply chain. In addition, it further supports the concept of the sustainability morality spectrum presented by Ha-Brookshire [5]. Finally, the study expands current consumer values, business ethics, and organizational behavior literature on the complicated relationship between individuals' personal and corporate identities as they relate to sustainability.

Likewise, the study provides feedback for the T&A supply chain, about three years after the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse, offering a point of comparison with prior research, as well as enough time for participants to have reflected on this catastrophe and its effects. In addition, the study provides helpful feedback for the industry related to the struggle some employees go through in aligning their identities. All the participants interviewed were passionate about their current job

roles and those that had a moral struggle, past or present, felt as such toward an employer, not their actual job role. Therefore, they wanted to find solutions that would keep them in the industry, so they could maintain their own values within the work setting, while doing what they loved. Furthermore, managing employees' expectations of corporate sustainability could mean the difference between satisfied employees and those that spread potentially harmful sentiments about employers to their peers. In addition, the findings highlight obstacles that need to be addressed to successfully engage consumers in the sustainability narrative told by companies. Finally, the study participants seemed to experience cathartic moments by reflecting on and sharing their past, present, and future in the T&A industry.

Within academia, the study findings can provide academia with knowledge on the current industry environment so they can better prepare students, as future supply chain members, for the work environment they will be entering. By equipping students both with the knowledge of potential challenges they will face at a personal level, but also the career planning to better understand how to align their personal values with that of the companies they are interested in working for, the students could gain more positive experiences in their careers. In addition, educators can better equip students with the tools to creatively and effectively problem solve so that they can, not only align their values for personal fulfillment, but also move industry forward on innovative solutions for sustainability problems.

The qualitative study was exploratory in nature, so it is essential to understand that the information cannot be generalized. Therefore, the study's findings should be considered limited, though a step toward further empirical study. The information revealed through the interviews can be used as a basis of understanding relationships between an individual's personal and corporate identity, or between an individual and a corporation. Additional qualitative and quantitative research can further support and develop these concepts in the future. One method of doing so could be by using tested methods of measuring values, such as the Schwartz value survey [26], to determine what basic values participants hold as significant and how those might change and be reprioritized in a given situation. Additionally, there are other factors that could contribute to the emergence of value gaps, such as profit maximization models and consumers' willingness to pay premiums for sustainable products, that could be better taken into consideration through further measures.

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, the sample size and scope of this study was limited. In addition, the study topic attracted participants who were interested in topics of sustainability or moral responsibility, and thus willing to give the time and energy to schedule and sit through interviews. However, this study shows a foundation for future survey research that could expand the range of willing participants, as a questionnaire is less invasive and time-consuming for the participant. Finally, future studies could expand the sample to non-industry professionals to determine if these findings correspond to a wider population with larger sample sizes.

Acknowledgments: No funding was received to support the research or the costs to publish in open access.

Author Contributions: Both authors conceived of and designed the study. Rachel LoMonaco-Benzin arranged and performed the interviews, while both authors analyzed the data. Rachel LoMonaco-Benzin wrote the paper with continued supervision and feedback from Jung Ha-Brookshire.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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