

# Sustainable Practices in Organic Apparel Industry

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## Abstract:

India is the second largest global textile manufacturer and its apparel market is expected to grow yearly at 11.1% (CAGR 2019-2021). The nation accounts for 74% of global organic clothing production which has gained momentum recently due to increasing health awareness and environmental hazards associated with conventional clothing. Organic fabric retailers are adopting ethical values to remain competitive in market. But limited purchase of organic clothes in domestic market is alarming. Hence, current study explored sustainable practices followed by retailers and consumers towards consumption of organic with organic clothing retailers followed by content analysis on emerging themes and subthemes. Conceptual framework has been developed. Findings indicate that Green price<sup>1</sup>, Green advertisement<sup>2</sup>, Green knowledge<sup>3</sup> and Green perceived value<sup>4</sup> are critical influencers to encourage sustainable practices towards consumption of organic clothing.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Textile industry significantly contributes in the financial growth for developing nations like India, where apparel retail market is estimated to progress at 9.7% annually and may arrive at INR 8306.45 billion by 2026 (Online, 2018). This is due to surge in digital revolution, globalization, growth in middle class segment, strengthened consumer's spending power and habits. Plell (2018) argued that conventional cotton uses 25 percent of pesticide utilized globally and causes health hazards. As per study by Parisi et al. (2015), apparel industry demands large amount of resources at every level of production. The solution lies in facilitating sustainable practices through purchase of organic apparel which is beneficial for both human health and environment. Organic apparel adheres to organic agricultural standards. It facilitates sustainability of soil, environment and human beings by utilizing natural inputs (Tong & Su, 2018). The presence of sustainable consumer is obvious in marketplace currently who understands the need to comply with

sustainable consuming trends (Wróblewski & Dacko-Pikiewicz, 2018).

## II. RESEARCH PROBLEM

Though many consumers express desire to go for sustainable products, very few take action on such thoughts (Visser et al., 2018). In his work, Kong et al. (2016) concluded that consumers have limited understanding on sustainability related to fashion which is a huge drawback for marketers as they try to introduce organic apparel in mainstream market. In their study, Majumdar & Sinha (2019) concluded that the complications involved in sustainable manufacturing, absence of consumer encouragement and regulatory body support as well as cost involved appeared as hurdles. With growing awareness among Indians on organic clothing products and retailers stocking organic fabric range deprived of chemicals and toxic substances (Khare & Sadachar, 2017), it is imperative to understand the factors which could trigger purchase of such products. Companies need to make use of existing sustainable practices to address dynamic consumer demands (Maletič et al., 2014).

This necessitated need to explore critical factors which can impact stable market demand for organic apparel products and has remained interest area for the scholar.

### III. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

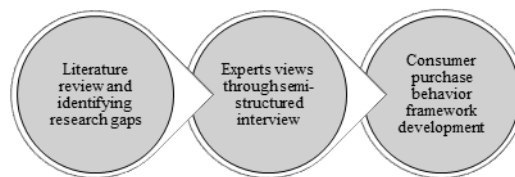
This study aims to identify and analyze the critical factors specific to purchase behaviour of sustainable organic apparel products and to propose a conceptual framework for market sustainability of organic clothing industry. Current study will also aid in gaining in-depth insight in to present sustainable practices at retailer and buyer's end. Utilizing the rich experience of industry experts, the researcher was able to depict effort made in sustainability-oriented practices in organic clothing so far and proposed potential ways for advancement of future sustainable purchase behavior.

### IV. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Most of the studies on consumer purchase behavior for sustainable apparel products have relied on theory of planned behavior (TPB) model as Hustvedt & Dickson (2009), Kang et al. (2013), Maloney et al. (2014), Cowan & Kinley (2014), Chang & Watchravesringkan (2018), Han (2018), Valdez & Lopez (2019). Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) has been relied upon to study green textile knowledge (Sampson, 2009) and influence of attitude towards purchase of green apparel (Zheng & Chi (2014).

### V. METHODOLOGY

This work has utilised literature review, retailer in-depth interview and data analysis using content analysis and weightage average scoring. It developed consumer purchase behaviour framework for organic apparel product (figure no.1).



**Figure No.1. Research Method**

In this study inductive content analysis has been adopted. This technique has been used by previous authors (Zanoli & Naspetti, 2002; Wang et al., 2018) to improve understanding in the area of consumer purchase behavior for sustainable organic apparel products.

### VI. CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAPS

Relevant works were reviewed for the complete years 2009 to 2018 (including recent papers in 2019). Original papers have been looked at wherever available in reference. The search words used were: ("factors impacting sustainable consumer purchase behaviour for organic apparel products") OR ("consumer purchase behaviour for sustainable organic clothing") OR ("sustainable consumer purchase behaviour for organic apparel products).

In his study Sampson (2009) concluded, that knowledge of environmentally friendly products enhances positive attitudes and motivation to search for such products and proposed to explore advertisement types further. In another work by Kang et al. (2013), consumers' product knowledge, perceived effectiveness and perceived personal relevance remained significant, and behavioural control was recommended to be further investigated. In his research, Lueg et al. (2013) stated that link between corporate sustainability and business model can be improvised and sustainability in communication to be investigated further. As per findings by Zheng & Chi (2014), favourable attitude is formed by environmental knowledge and they proposed

attitude for green products to be examined. In a study by Maloney et al. (2014), awareness was found to be directly impacting attitude and purchase behaviour for organic apparel was suggested to be explored. In his work, Quinn (2014) found novel knowledge significant and proposed perceived barrier to be studied further. In his study, Varshneya et al. (2017) found attitude act as mediator between value and intention and advised to examine income and price, and fashion consciousness in future research. Likewise, Vehmas et al. (2018) concluded quality, style and comfort are utmost important and proposed attitude towards organic clothes to be studied further. In his research work, Jacob et al. (2018) concluded that self-transcendence values are important, and online and catalogue shopping favourable impact sustainable clothing buying conduct, he suggested to explore consumer knowledge, trust and social norms in future. According to Chang & Watchravesringkan (2018), environmental apparel attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control impacts sustainable apparel buying intention and he proposed to study actual behaviour, money availability, sustainable clothing shop and wide understanding of sustainable apparel further. Higher level of cloth quality and caring in advertisement cause high purchase as per Song & Kim (2018), who suggested to study fair trade, animal welfare and recycling advertisement. Han (2018) found in his study that perceived behavioural control and descriptive norms are significant and proposed to explore psychographic characteristics in future. Awareness of consequence, self-efficacy and attitude appeared significant for Taljaard et al. (2018) in his study who proposed to research on socio psychological and motivational factors further. Wiederhold & Martinez (2018) stated price, personal circumstances, lack of information, availability and style of sustainable fashion as barrier and highlighted Online fashion exchange and recycling and disposal system as future scope

of study. There is a favourable association among interest in understanding upcycling technique, buyer creative mind and fashion consciousness as per another study by Bhatt, Silverman, & Dickson (2019) who recommended for further research on aesthetic appeal. In another study attitude, perceived behaviour control and social norm remained significant (Iran, Geiger & Schrader, 2019), and perceived values and social influence was proposed for future work. Valdez & Lopez (2019) found emotional connection and sense of belonging to ethnic group significant and argued that information on textile origin and organic composition of product and consumers with absence of belongingness to ethnic group need to be part of future studies and they found emotional connection and sense of belonging to ethnic group significant in their study. Sustainable clothing production knowledge needs attention of researchers as per Garcia et al. (2019) who discovered that consumers are unaware on cloth production process and female consumers have higher sustainability concerns compared to their male counterparts. Some other factors observed from research gap were social and environmental performance, external policies ((Marques et al., 2010), readiness to spend (Lin, 2010); stakeholders involvement and organizational competitiveness and ethically oriented fashion companies (Goworek, 2011). Green trust, green motive, green perceived value and green attitude was found critical determinants impacting organic clothing purchase behavior ((Mishra & Devakumar, 2018)

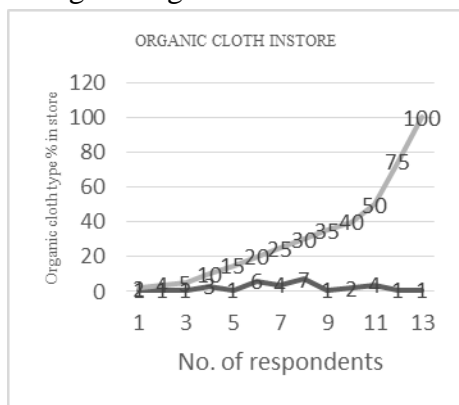
## VII. SEMI STRUCTURED EXPERT INTERVIEW

Based on research gap from literature review, qualitative approach was adopted and semi structured questionnaire was prepared (Annexure I) to gain in-depth insight into consumer purchase behavior for organic clothing. Non-probability purposive sampling method was deployed. Organic

clothing retailers who were interested to share their experience were filtered for final survey. One to one interaction with respondents was done to acquire high grade input. Total 33 experts (retailers) from organic clothing industry have been part of final study. A pretest was carried out initially on 3 retailers to make the questionnaire relevant and erase complex items. Data was recorded via audio and in writing. Scholar has used several scales including Likert and rating scale.

### VIII. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

Majority of respondents were in the age range of 24-42 years. Participants were mostly qualified graduates (52%), with 30% holding post graduate degree as well and hence suitable for the study. PUC and Diploma holders contributed 9% of total respondents each. 31 respondents confirmed being retailer, out of other two, one was manufacturer, whole seller and retailer, and another was manufacturer and retailer. Most of the retailers confirmed inhouse production facility for organic clothing product. 32 respondents claimed to have staff strength of 0-10 at their respective stores. When asked presence of contract employees instore, 18% said yes and 82% confirmed not having any employee on contract. For retailer having contract employees, majority claimed contract staff percentage between 0-10. 21 respondents out of 33, agreed that they their company has social goal behind starting the organization.



**Figure No.2. Percentage of Organic Cloth Type Instore**

Seven number of stores maintained 30% of organic cloth type product in store, for remaining stores percentage of organic cloth type is scattered. Only one store kept 100% organic cloth alone (figure no.2). Reason related to limited supply of organic cloth was explained by retailer as limited demand and cost involved in procuring and high price. Organic cotton is most common organic fibre preferred by retailer. 15 respondents indicated they keep casual wear and others offered ethnic wear as buyers are more likely to go for such category of clothing. Retailers explained that reason for keeping organic cotton stock mainly was due to the fact that customers have better understanding on same compared to other organic fabric. Most of retailers declared having their own manufacturing and designing setup inhouse and expertise in same. Instore purchase was mainly observed compared to online sales of organic apparel. All the respondents disclosed of dealing on organic cotton fibre, though only few agreed of using other organic fibre as bamboo, organic hemp, organic wool, organic linen and organic silk. Also, respondents stated organic cotton certification is well defined and is easily associated with cotton products in consumers mind, and easy to explain and sell. 23 respondents indicated both male and female genders visiting stores though 10 of the respondents disclosed only female customers visiting stores. Majority customers were regular buyers and included housewives, working professionals and retired individuals. Some indicated entry of student segment off late to their stores. 31 respondents agreed Gen Y visiting their store. Though most of them also indicated Gen X and Baby boomers as customers. Five of the respondents also agreed on Gen Z (up to 23-year age) as visitors. When inquired on income class of customers coming to organic cloth stores, 11 responded as middle class, upper middle and upper class visiting their stores. Whereas 22 of them agreed of only upper middle and upper class visiting their outlets. 99% of respondents agreed that both organic and non-organic product buyers visit their store. 10 respondents were completely unaware on

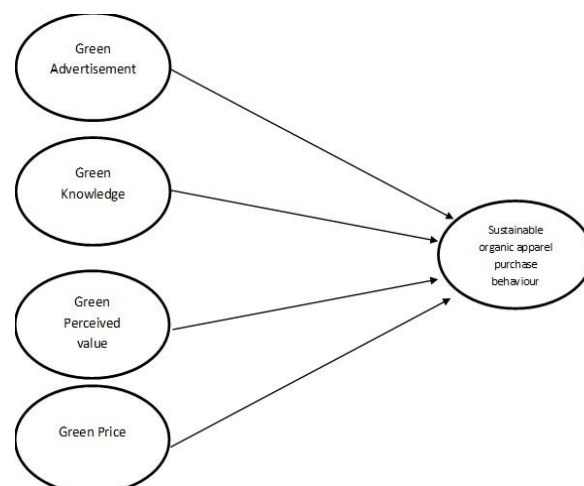
online sales aspects. Though most of them indicated majority sales happening at physical stores. Even 8 of the respondents indicated more 51% or above sales happening instore. 20 respondents told they get regular customers who comes on routine basis for various clothing needs.

When inquired about most critical factors impacting purchase of organic apparel product, green advertisement got highest scoring at 160, green knowledge and green perceive value ranked next at 150 followed by green price scored at 140 points (figure no. 3) using weighted average scoring method.



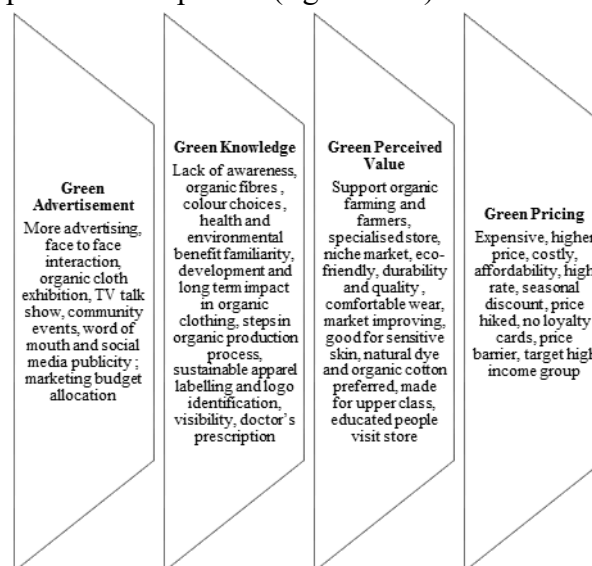
**Figure No.3. Factors Level of Impact towards organic apparel purchase**

Based on novel factors identified from research gap and survey findings, scholar has suggested conceptual framework on critical factors impacting purchase behavior sustainable organic apparel products depicted in figure no.4.



**Figure No.4. Consumer organic apparel purchase behaviour framework**

As per open ended questions and analysis of critical factors influencing buyers and retailers' sustainable practices scholar has found below observations using content analysis approach and categorization of themes and subthemes using keywords from respondents' responses (figure no.5)



**Figure No.5. Theme and Sub-theme of Most Influential Factors for Organic Apparel Purchase**

Some of the key comments made by respondents were groups under relevant critical factors as depicted in figure no.6 for meaningful insight.

**Green advertisement**  
"Most organic brands are small companies so unless the person is rich enough, he cannot do it or venture capital companies can invest, but most of these angel investor guys go for technology-based companies alone. Marketing of product need money and most of organic companies don't have money to do this. Advertising in exclusive TV shows, public notifications in newspaper, you tube videos will help. Most housewives spend good time in front of TV hence TV ads are important. Instore display board in small shops and road side signage boards is important.

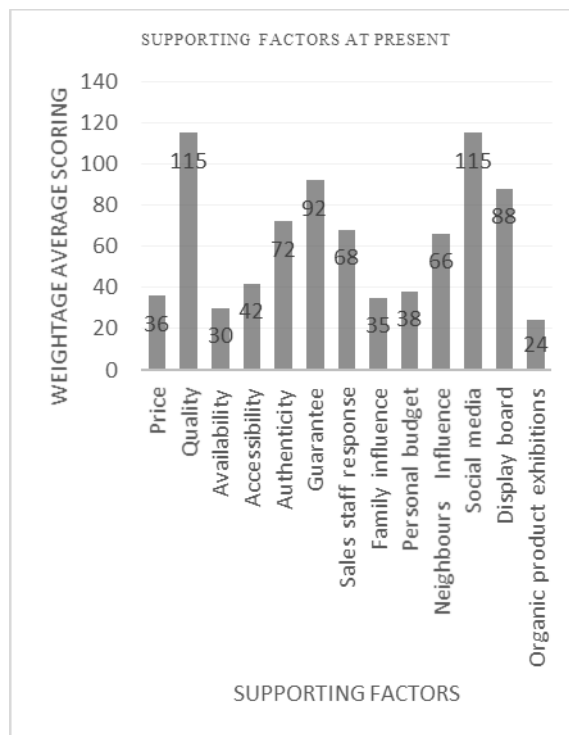
**Green knowledge**  
"Awareness on organic cloth is lacking. Most people have not even heard about organic clothing they don't know what it is so creating knowledge about the product is important than pricing and all other features like designs etc., everything falls back. We tell customers how organic material is grown, without pesticides and artificial ingredients as they have no idea. People are information seekers nowadays. Knowledge of environment, long term impact and challenges with organic production will help".

**Green Perceived value**  
"Organic cotton product are perceived to belong to very niche market and are ecofriendly. It is for people who are able to buy at higher price so it is available at higher price. "But I feel its a very wrong concept to do it because if you have to go for bigger market such values should signal catering to general middle man market. People value organic cloth as avoidance of skin rashes and allergies to conventional clothing. Customer values fabric quality. Social service orientation needed. Buyers satisfied with organic cloth. Some people not prepared to listen on organic clothes. Natural vegetable and flower colour in organic sarees appeals. Most people buy in second visit. People differ in what they see in organic cloth (look, quality, price, usage of natural dyes etc.). Educated people value organic products. If people like they will buy irrespective of any other barriers".

**Green Pricing**  
"Pricing for organic cloth need to be at par with conventional clothes as everybody will appreciate it but nobody will buy it because its expensive. Environment effects everybody so even middle class should be able to buy it. Most organic food, organic vegetables and some organic cloth brands have artificially hiked price at retailer end. But I feel its a very wrong concept to do it because if you have to go for bigger market, pricing need to be set right. Customer are going for organic as it is ecofriendly, and environment effects everybody so product should be available for everybody and not only for niche segment. Organic production is limited and need to meet all organic certifications through all stages (dying, weaving, knitting etc.) hence its expensive. Pricing is reasonable for upper class who visit such stores regularly. Festival time discounts will help. Explanation on reasons for expensiveness is needed. Organic cloth is costly".

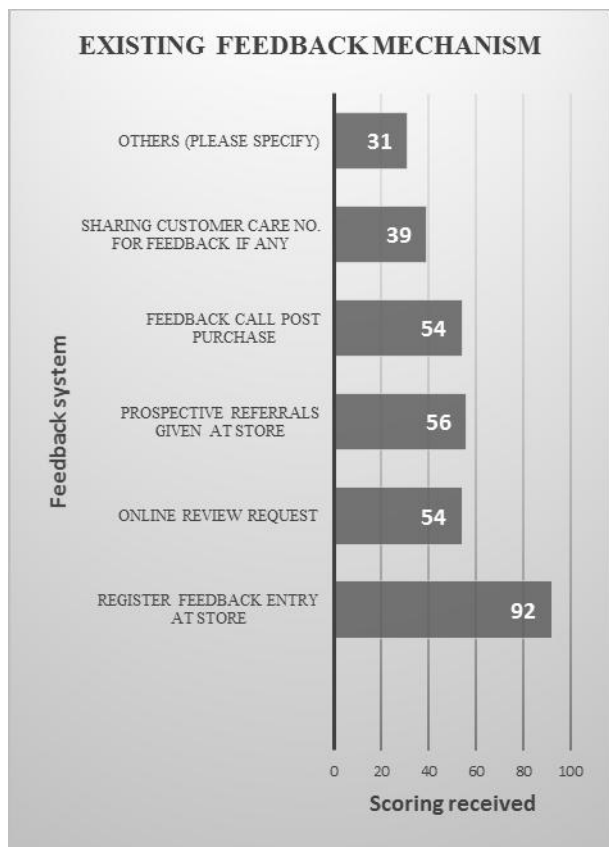
**Figure No.6. Key Comments Categorization Basis Critical Factors**

When interrogated on supporting factors for organic apparel product in current market setup, maximum scoring was received by cloth quality (115) and social media advertisement (115). Next was product guarantee (92) and display board (88). Organic product exhibition got lowest scoring 24 (figure no.7).



**Figure No.7. Factors Supporting Purchase of Organic Apparel at Present**

Most of the retailers agreed that conducting organic cloth product exhibition locally in future will support sales of organic clothes. When asked about existing customer feedback mechanism in stores for buyers of organic clothing, highest scoring (92) was found for register feedback entry at store followed by prospective referrals given at store (56). Feedback call post purchase and online review request received equal score (54 each) as detailed in figure no.8.



**Figure No. 8. Existing Feedback System**

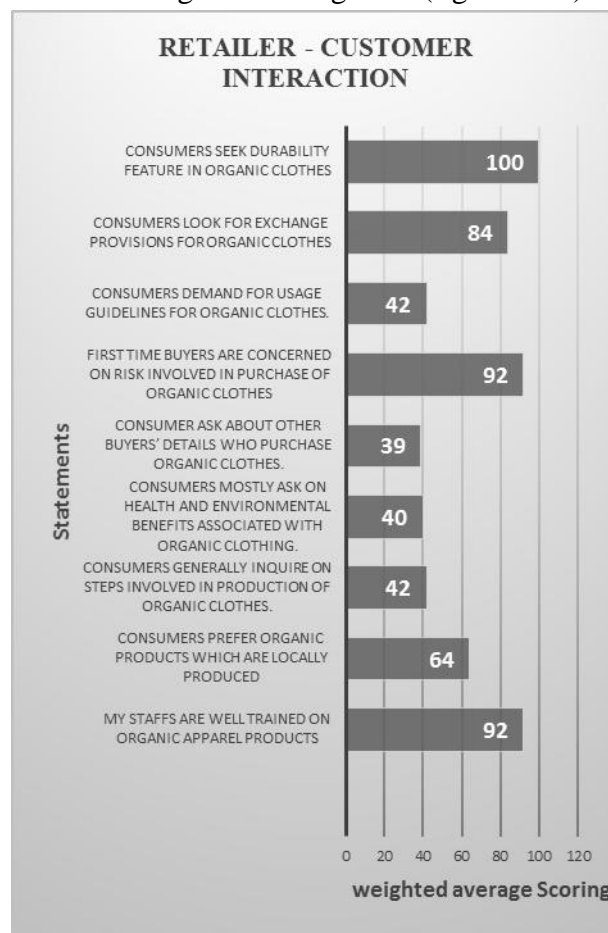
Majority of respondents stated that customer feedback relates to customer service provided at store by staff, though very few mentioned feedbacks related to design, color and variety options searched by the buyers.

As per weightage average scoring, maximum numbers of participants opted for growing trend in organic clothing market (scored 84) followed by stagnant market (scored 30) based on weightage average scoring. Durability and exchange provision remain critical parameters for end consumers as per industry experts.

**Opportunities and Challenges:** Few retailers indicated on future business survival plan of entering or inclusion of additional product categories. Financial support to small organic cloth firms is needed. Customer who like the organic material, purchase without any queries. Challenge lies among non-purchasers, once customer buys organic cloth, he normally shows satisfaction. For organic range for new born, once customer, they visit at every growth stage of their infants changing clothing requirement. Upper middle and Upper class are

prime users of organic cloth must be targeted as prime customers. People search for bright and dark colours. in organic cloth which stands as challenge today. Interest level is low among buyers.

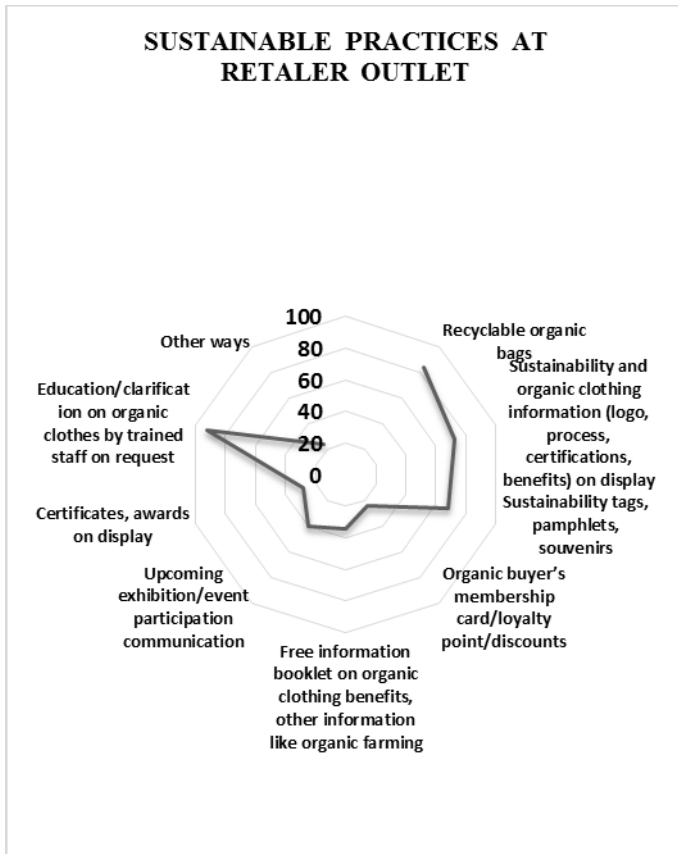
On interrogating about nature of interaction with customers, scoring for consumers seeking durability received highest score. First time buyers concern on purchase risk and well-trained staff on the product received next highest scoring each (figure no.9).



**Figure No.9. Inputs on Retailer Customer Interaction at Store**

Further, respondents commented that consumer do not look for exchange and are generally satisfied with organic clothing products. Even they don't ask questions like production process involved, once they are mentally convinced and like the product.

When inquired about sustainable practices at retailer shop, education on organic product by staff got highest score (92) followed by providing recyclable shopping bags at store (84) detailed in figure no.10.



**Figure No. 10. Sustainable Green Practices at Retailer Store**

Most of the respondents are bringing additional product variety in existing organic cloth category and few venturing for other organic products for business expansion.

## IX. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Male to female ratio of respondents has mostly been maintained to rule out gender bias. Gen Y dominated retailer group. Only few post graduate qualified retailers were witnessed which could be a drawback to know intricacies in selling organic product considering the educated crowd visiting such stores. A nominal portion were diploma/undergraduates which again could be a disadvantage to maintain quality of interaction with organic community. All the respondents were organic cloth retailers meeting study objectives. Retail shops (99%) were manned sufficiently with majority having permanent employees which might help retailer to retain trained staff and encourage commitment in explaining organic benefit to customers. Most of the

respondents appeared to be knowing company's motive to start the organization to be social goal like boosting weaver employment, promoting organic farming etc. Few retailers appeared not knowing company goal and need marketer's attention. Variation in supply of organic cloth type in comparison to conventional clothing is noticed alarming promoters that demand is unstable. Limited product categories in organic clothing is observed in retailer outlets. At the same time retailers have started consciously stocking organic apparel as customer like texture, touch and feel of such products. Some retailers explained the reason being customers not being interested, ignorant, and not seeking clothes devoid of chemicals. Organic cotton is available mainly due to its certification process and cotton being most known among buyer group. Some retailers have kept organic cloth in boutique shops. Female customers are majorly visiting organic stores supporting previous studies. Working class are major customers. Most of the retailers use company logos and in rare instances GOTS. Other company goals consisted of customer centric goals or unknown which shows companies need to have bottom up approach to sensitize their staff on company goals in order to help them to serve their customer in better ways. Customer priorities physical store over online for look and feel of fabric. Majority of retailers have expertise and financial independence in manufacturing and designing their own products and supplying end product to the market through retail outlets and they want to maintain their brand name, uniqueness and independence through same. And also define their market segment as few declared mother and child, traditional wear, sustainable cloth wears etc. Majority of participants agreed on only upper middle and upper class visiting their store indicating organic cloth market being dominated by rich class alone at present, though with some of the respondents also voting for middle class coming to such store is a ray of hope on more income classes of society venturing for such products. Almost all the retailers in this study said both organic and non-organic product



buyers are coming for purchasing organic cloth indicates the tremendous market potential of organic clothing. Few retailers were only updated with instore sales and had no idea on online sales. This may sensitize senior management in retail industry to cross check level of knowledge retailer representatives carry for online store performance in addition to instore sales performance for his/her professional growth in the industry. This study indicated customer lack awareness on organic clothing. This is in line with earlier research work findings on absence of awareness among consumers on apparel production. Quality and social media helps retailers at present to add more product categories and enter new product under organic label as per findings. Even Song and Kim (2018) in their work found that higher level of cloth quality leads to higher purchase. Social norms in terms of family and neighbor group influence stands relatively insignificant compared to social media in terms of support provided in purchase of organic clothing. Such finding contradicts earlier finding by Iran, Geiger & Schrader (2019) that social norms significantly influence buying behavior. This may be due to advent of digitization and smart phones where people are more inclined to take aid from social media rather than family and friends near and around them. Organic cloth product exhibition was found to be least supporting in sales of organic cloth as rarely one finds exhibitions locally arranged on same and need to be addresses by sustainability promoting industry leaders. This will boost awareness and visibility among prospective customers. Current pricing of organic clothing is not supportive in sales across varied income groups. Similar results were found by Jönsson & Henriksson (2018), where green apparel price was above normal range mostly. Availability of organic cloth again need focus as its not readily available across organic product shop or other cloth shops. The finding supports previous study by Wiederhold & Martinez (2018) who found availability of sustainable fashion as barrier. Mainly such products are stocked in boutique shop or organic product stores. Durability feature of organic

apparel is most sought after by buyers today. Also, as per outcome of study, very few consumers ask on production process involved in organic clothing. Similar way, Garcia et al. (2019) argued buyers are unaware on cloth production process. Hence need for such information has to be encouraged through appropriate advertisement campaigns. Previous authors also indicated that females are more concerned on sustainability of a product. Same is supported by findings of this study as ten respondents mentioned female buyers alone visiting their stores. Current feedback system needs to be looked at, because most retailers are still adhering to traditional register entry on customer feedback. Outcome also indicated that organic cloth market is growing which is supporting latest media coverage which states buyers demand for organic apparel is on surge causing more producers to adopt organic clothing products in their product line in India (Times of India, 2019) and as per study by Mishra & G. (2018).

## X. RECOMMENDATION

They are: 1) Customer need to perceive added value for bigger cause in long terms for individual, society and surrounding. Pricing strategies embracing varied income groups to be implemented 2) Simplified information sharing by well qualified retailers highlighting its advantages compared to conventional clothing 3) Adoption of different appeals like fear of global warming, animal well-being etc. by social media advertisements. Implementing novel ways of promotions inclusive of hosting organic apparel events in community locally, display boards in shopping areas, conducting organic cloth exhibition to enhance knowledge and awareness on sustainable products. Reinvention of effective customer feedback system will be added advantage to win confidence of buyers. 4) More categories in organic apparel to be added and organic cloth supply to majority of cloth shops will aid to improve accessibility, familiarity, availability and visibility of such products.

## XI. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Study is restricted to qualitative technique implementation alone and specific location (Bengaluru, Karnataka).

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