SPORTSWEAR APPAREL And The Move Towards Sustainability

Phoebe Meades

University of Winchester Business School

Postgraduate Report

**Abstract**

The aim of this research is to evaluate the current procedures a sportswear brand follow within their operations and how this is situated within the issue of sustainable development and responsible management. The research sets out the current theory within sustainable development, including the ‘Shared Value Creation’ model from Bocken *et al* (2013) and the ‘Sustainable Business Typologies’ offered by Dyllick and Muff (2016), and investigates how the company can utilise these theories to enhance their sustainable practices.

This paper identifies how the current practices conducted by the company can be improved upon to ensure the company becomes a leading organisation within sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are analysed here within the context of the company’s operations to support the argument of sustainable development and the recommendations to create a sustainable supply chain and guarantee responsible human resource management.

**1.0 Introduction**

The sportswear apparel sector has faced many challenges throughout its lifetime, including a recent shift to online retailing, its sponsorships of athletes and questions about ethical practices within its supply chain (Danzinger 2017). However, it has also been presented with modern and innovative opportunities through the expansion of social media influencing, sponsorship of world-class athletes and the advancement of sportswear technology (Kim, 2020). Nevertheless, the leading company is currently has a total brand value of $34.8 million and now offers a vast range of products including sportswear, equipment and footwear (O’Connell, 2020) with the next biggest competitor worth $16.5 million (Statista, 2020).

With the leading brand trailblazing the way in its market share and innovative products, it is evident that the corporation must become a leading business within responsible management in order to establish a more sustainable method of production and consumption that other organisations within the sector will follow. Therefore, this essay will examine the management practices, alongside the relevant theory, and provide recommendations for sustainable development within the corporation.

**2.0 Responsible Management Theory**

The value mapping tool was developed by Bocken *et al* (2013) to assist in the identification of value creation opportunities to support sustainable business modelling. This is displayed in figure 1. The value mapping model can also be utilised to understand how value can be missed or destroyed in order to substantiate how firms or stakeholders have failed to capitalise on resources or resources (ibid). Here, it is evident that the brand creates value through its increased use of recycled materials, responsible manufacturing and reducing carbon emissions whilst continuing to create and develop innovative products for its consumers (N, 2020a). However, it can be argued that the company is destroying value through its continued use of a linear production model and unsustainable materials (Blowfield and Murray, 2014). Nevertheless, the brand can be presented with many value opportunities as it is the leading corporation within the sports apparel sector and is a prominent company within innovative design (Statista, 2020). Therefore, the organisation must be able to understand and capture these opportunities to allow it to become a leading sustainable and responsible organisation.

Figure 1 - Shared Value Creation (Bocken et al., 2013)

The typologies offered by Dyllick and Muff (2016) establish a new approach to defining business sustainability by focusing on the effective contributions to sustainable development. These typologies aim to align company activities with the global environment and society by integrating the social, economic and environmental issues within business practices. This framework sets out the differing levels of sustainable development that companies incorporate within their practice, from business-as-usual, a purely economic view, to a truly sustainable business, where businesses first understand the external environment within which it operates before attempting to overcome these challenges. It can be argued that the company have moved away from the 1.0 typology of ‘refined shareholder value management’ and have begun operating within the 2.0 guidelines of ‘managing for the Triple Bottom Line’. This is applicable to the brand as, within recent years, the company have initiated the integration of sustainability objectives into its planning and reporting in order to remain accountable for its production and consumption (N, 2020b). This can also be evidenced through the company’s use of recycled materials, sourcing renewable energy for its factories and production, and its contribution to sustainable initiatives such as Reuse-A-Shoe (N, 2020c).

However, the company cannot be examined as having obtained the 3.0 typology of ‘truly sustainable business’ as a company that operates within this typology first analyses the external environment and questions what the firm can do to overcome the critical challenges facing that sector. Ultimately, these businesses will translate sustainability challenges into opportunities, thus changing the value created for the Triple Bottom Line to creating value for the common good (Dyllick and Muff, 2016). The organisation is yet to achieve the 3.0 status as, whilst they have incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals into their operations, the company has previously been criticised for its use of sweatshops, mass production practices which have led to increased waste, and questions of employee welfare within its factories (Haug and Busch, 2016).

This is further supported by Hahn *et al* (2015) who set out the framework of paradoxical thinking that examines how paradoxes refer to a situation where opposing elements co-exist, however achieving sustainability depends on the ability of controlling conflicting elements simultaneously. Whilst many companies are trending towards a more sustainable approach, there lies an evident paradox within the industry as the sports apparel sector has traditionally promoted heavy consumption of products and materials and is commonly categorised as ‘fast fashion’. This is evidenced through the sector’s continual use of sweatshops, cheap labour and use of harmful materials, such as polyester that incorporates woven materials which are hard to reuse or recycle (Hayes, 2016). One of the most prominent examples of a paradox within the sector is the continued use of cotton which is commonly known for its connection with pesticides in manufacturing and hazardous in terms of its after-treatments and finishing processes (Bruun and Langkjaer, 2016). However, the company has responded to this paradox by stating within its financial and sustainability reporting that the company aims to use 100% sustainably sourced cotton within its manufacturing of products by the end of 2020 (N, 2020d). Nevertheless, the company has failed to report on their progress towards this goal.

In recent years, some corporations have altered their business model to focus on strategic innovation with the incorporation of a ‘closed-loop’ manufacturing model which utilise renewable resources and employ disruptive technologies that radically reduce its carbon footprint (Cavaleri and Shabana, 2018). This is evidenced in the company’s sustainability reporting which states how the company is increasingly employing the use of recycled materials within its manufacturing whilst utilising waste management centres that consolidate and process scrap materials to other businesses for use (N, 2020e). A circular manufacturing and supply loop within the sportswear apparel industry would assist the sector in moving towards more sustainable practices as well as responsible consumption, which is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs, 2020).

**3.0 Towards Sustainable Development**

From this analysis of the company’s current practices, it is evident that there are responsible management procedures that must be prioritised within the sector’s operations in order for it to become a leading corporation within sustainable development. These recommendations focus on sustainable supply chain management and human resource management whilst incorporating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Additionally, these recommendations stem from the paradoxes that have arisen from promoting sustainability within the fast fashion industry and the issues surrounding the sector and its use of sweatshops with cheap labour. Furthermore, whilst corporations are required to report on their financial earnings and progress towards sustainability, their current reports are often generic and vague in its wording (Hopkins, 2016; N, 2020f).

**3.1 Sustainable Supply Chain Management**

Sustainable supply chain management is defined by Jalilian and Mirghafoori (2019) as a set of directives that assist in the integration of environmental issues of the organisation into its production and processes of products in order to minimise material flow and reduce the negative impacts of production. The apparel industry faces the most prominent challenges for maintaining sustainability within their supply chains as the global fragmentation of the industry involves a high level of outsourcing within developing countries (Baig *et al*., 2020). In particular, the company has been criticised for its use of harmful chemicals and toxic waste produced from its textile factories alongside its use of sweatshops (Pierce, 2020).

Corporations that operate with a sustainable supply chain often benefit from a number of factors that are attached to sustainable business. One key benefit includes the reduced risk of prosecution or being subjected to boycotts as a result of unethical practices (Emmett and Sood). The brand have previously been the subject of boycotts when it was discovered that it was responsible for malpractice, poor employee welfare and use of harmful chemicals within its supply chain (Birch, 2012). This saw their profits fall by 16% and their share prices drop by 57% (Carlile, 2019). Furthermore, sports apparel commonly uses materials such as polyester which are seen as unsustainable due to the use of a variety of materials woven together (Ritch, 2020). The founder of the company openly stated that the company had been slow to respond to reports of poor practice and set the target for the company to become transparent in its suppliers and operations within its supply chains (Jones, 2012). The company employs the use of large manufacturing plants in many countries across the world with their key manufacturers located in China, Thailand and Vietnam (N, 2020g). With many large manufacturing plants located in Asian countries to exploit the use of cheap labour and materials, the company has been noted for its lack of reporting surrounding its supply chains and resources.

Therefore, it would be recommended that the sportswear apparel industry begins to prioritise transparent reporting of their suppliers that are connected to their manufacturing networks as well as moving towards a circular supply loop, as displayed in figure 2. Currently, the most common operating logistics of the fashion industry is one of mass production, fast fashion consumption and the linear ‘take-make-dispose’ model (Pulse of the Fashion Industry, 2017). By increasing reporting surrounding its supply chains and use of materials, the sector will be able to identify the most harmful practices and resources whilst understanding what can be done to further its responsible management and sustainability initiatives.



Figure 2 - Closed Loop Supply Chain (Mishra et al., 2018)

One of the key drivers to move towards a sustainable supply chain is the effect of external pressure from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the media (Sajjad *et al*, 2019). These external influences often correlate with the stakeholder theory which sets out how corporations implement sustainability within their operations as a result of increased stakeholder expectations of ethical and transparent behaviour (Busse, 2016). The stakeholder theory is applicable to this industry and its supply chain management practices because, as a result of growing media pressure and an international boycott, the company began to report on their manufacturing processes and supply chains. Nevertheless, the company continue to source most of its raw materials within the host country of the factory through independent suppliers (Singh, 2019). Whilst this lean manufacturing approach improves efficiency and optimises production, it can be argued that the brand’s supply chain lacks transparency and traceability through employing external suppliers. However, it must be noted that the company has previously published its list of suppliers to create greater transparency, however this has not been updated since 2005 (N, 2005). Furthermore, as sustainable development is a key issue within industry today, many companies are beginning to move towards a circular supply chain in order to reduce waste and improve efficiency.

Nevertheless, the company has begun to employ closed loop practices through its increased use of recycled materials and fibres as well as the development of innovative products that incorporate sustainable technologies (N, 2019). However, it can be argued that the company is not exhaustive in its attempts to become transparent in its supply chains and sustainable in its manufacturing. The leading company has vast influence over its suppliers as it is the leading company within its sector and, therefore, can leverage its influence to create a positive impact by employing sustainable, ethical suppliers (B Impact Assessment, 2018). This can assist in value creation for the company as, by becoming transparent within its supply chain management and moving towards closed loop manufacturing, the corporation can quickly become a leading business within sustainable supply and production. The brand is currently creating value through its shoe recycling scheme, Reuse-A-Shoe, where trainers of any brand are returned to a retail store to be broken down and its remaining materials can be reused in new products (News, 2020h). This is evidence that the sector is moving towards a closed manufacturing loop, however this is only apparent with its footwear and not with its apparel or equipment.

Furthermore, creating a sustainable supply chain loop will directly correspond with Goals 12 and 13 of the UN SDGs, which focus on responsible consumption and production and climate action (UN SDGs, 2020). The recommendation to move towards a closed circular supply loop will highlight how the brand is conscious of sustainable development, whilst assisting in the elimination of waste production and use of more environmentally friendly materials that will create a longer life for the product itself. As the company is the market leader within its sector, it has the opportunity to become a trailblazer in sustainable business, which other companies within the sports apparel sector can imitate and follow.

**3.2 Responsible Human Resource Management**

Human resource management is often defined as the systematic process of acquiring and engaging the required workforce that is appropriate for the job whilst developing and maintaining the operations of the business (Obedgiu, 2017). Responsible human resource management is closely interlinked with sustainable development and responsible business as the way in which corporations interpret social responsibility will have implications for its employees and human resources managers. The issue of responsible human resource management is closely linked with the UN SDGs as it relates to Goal 8 of decent work and economic growth which aims to promote sustained, inclusive economic growth with full and productive employment for all (United Nations, 2020). Additionally, the Global Reporting Initiative’s Social Standards set out the crucial guidelines for responsible human resource management that can guide the corporation towards positive changes.

The sector has previously been heavily criticised for its human resource management when it was made apparent that the company’s suppliers and subcontractor factories were following unfair labour practices and failed to report on the working conditions within their key factories (Greenberg and Knight, 2004). The brand has employed the use of sweatshops to manufacture and produce their goods since their creation in 1964 as this method of production offers cheap labour costs and mass manufacturing (ibid). Sweatshops, often established within developing nations, were created as a response to the globalisation of business and the constant demand for goods and services in the western world. This presents an evident paradox as, whilst consumers will view sweatshops as objectionable and abhorrent, they are a necessity within today’s economy and global supply chains. As a result of this, the company was the subject of an enormous boycott campaign in the 1990s after the information about the history of where, and under what conditions, products were made became a matter of concern for the brand’s consumers around the globe (Carty, 2002).

Responsible human resource management became a key issue within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as more customers turned to online shopping as stores and retail outlets remained closed (Meyer, 2020). This has put an increased strain on the sector’s human resources within its warehouse, supply and manufacturing as social distancing and the requirement for personal protective equipment (PPE) has been introduced. The company have responded to this by stating that they are continuing to work closely with their suppliers to produce and distribute PPE for frontline workers (N, 2020i). Furthermore, in a recent report, it was asserted that the company have implemented health and safety practices and processes in line with the regulations set out by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) which include physical barriers and orders to stay home if any employee begins to develop symptoms of COVID-19 (ibid). Nevertheless, the company’s reporting of their response to COVID-19 and how this has affected it employees within all areas of the supply chain, from manufacturing to retail stores, remains generic in its wording, with limited information as to the infrastructure it has in place if employees were to develop COVID-19 (WARC, 2020).

Carroll’s (1991) Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can assist in understanding where the company is positioned regarding responsible human resource management. This is displayed in figure 3. Currently, it can be argued that the company is situated within the first two levels of the pyramid as it is only fulfilling its economic and legal responsibilities. This is evidenced through its obligation to follow the nation’s laws in which it operates and by generating annual profit which, ultimately, is the core aim for any business (Blowfield and Murray, 2014). However, the company is not currently operating within the top two tiers of this pyramid as it can be argued that are not fulfilling their philanthropic or ethical responsibility. Whilst the brand has initiatives in place to support developing communities and its employees, their current model of utilising harmful practice of mass manufacturing with the use of sweatshops will not allow the company to move into the top two tiers of the Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (News, 2020; Carroll, 1991).



Figure 3 - Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (Carroll, 1991)

**4.0 Conclusion**

Overall, it is evident that the sector is moving towards a more sustainable business, through its increasing use of recycled materials and the introduction of recycling initiatives as a response to reduce waste within the industry (N, 2020). However, its continued use of mass manufacturing and over production of goods presents a persistent paradox within its practices. Therefore, by analysing the relevant theory surrounding responsible management, it can be argued that the company must increase its reporting surrounding its supply chains and utilise responsible human resource management systems in order to become transparent in its operations whilst facilitating the identification of any unsustainable or irresponsible practices within its procedures. Ultimately, the company can become a leading sustainable business and contribute towards the positive development of the UN SDGs whilst creating constructive shared value and moving towards the philanthropic tier of the Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility (Carroll, 1991).

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