

Exploring Care Label Application in Apparel Industries in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

Textile care labeling makes the manufacturer accountable for the product's performance and at the same time educates the apparel consumer on how to take care of the products they buy. The study therefore sought to find out how the Zimbabwean clothing manufacturers design and apply care labels for their products. Eleven clothing manufacturers from the two largest cities in Zimbabwe were purposively selected for the study. An exploratory case study design in qualitative research approach was used in the study. Face to face interviews and observation were used to collect data from quality control managers from the sampled companies. The study found that although the apparel manufacturers applied care labels on their products, little attention was accorded to quality of the labels since most of the manufacturers did not carry out relevant tests to guide them in designing care label information, also some companies used same care labels for products with different fiber content and did not apply care labels on all products.

Keywords: care labels, Zimbabwe, label quality

Introduction

Care labels are important because they guide consumers in decision making when purchasing textiles. Quite a number of different labeling methods or tags are used worldwide causing confusion in the market place. Some of these textile care labels do not provide relevant information on ironing. European Union (EU) institutions and their respective consumer council recommended that the textile regulation be simplified to allow product users to get more information

on how to use and care for the textile products (Kokas-Palicska, 2011). The consumer council and the EU advised that the textile regulation board should engage a comprehensive research to examine the need for mandatory labeling of textile products. The issues to be addressed include fashion product manual bearing use instructions; unification of product sizes, indication of country where the product was made and allergic materials incorporated in the product, electronic tagging and other

technological substances included in the product.

Product performance and its maintenance play a role in retaining customers especially in the area of apparel products. As such various legislative bodies the world over have tried to come up with standard ways on how the apparel products are cared for and how such information is conveyed to the customer. Such standard ways include label tags containing signs and text format information for consumers to effectively care for the products. It is critical for the label tags and signs to effectively communicate the intended information to the consumer so that the product's performance and durability is not affected during use. From a manufacturing perspective, getting a textile care label supplier is a big challenge if a minimum number of products are produced especially custom labels requiring full color custom tags. Textile care label designers and suppliers usually work with numbers such as 1000 and more labels for them to run profitable business. This presents a challenge when the clothing manufacturer is running a small order that has to be tagged with specific care labels and also in the case of custom name tags that change regularly or differ with different products or product material. The size of the care label also matters as legible images and text should be used to make the label as informative as possible for the consumers. In their study Mupfumira and Jinga (2013) state that common problems or defects notable on garments included trousers that become shiny and cardigans losing shape. They attribute these defects to insufficient knowledge in terms of how to care for the product after purchase. Mupfumira and Jinga (2013) opine that a care label which is only conveyed in form of a symbol like an iron or triangle may be difficult for consumers to easily understand and as such might require addition of text instructions to such images on the care label.

Care label material is also a basic requirement in designing or acquiring

clothing care labels. The care label should have permanent wash fabric print, strong enough to last life of a garment or accessory. Woven satin labels have a thin black or gray line to enable trimming of labels to required size and can be sewn to product (clothing) without visibility on product. Woven satin fabric have an excellent color print and better readability for small details such as clothing care labeling information texts and signs.

Statement of problem

Innovation in labeling products is critical to meet innovation in fabric production especially to address issues of sustainability in clothing production such as nano and eco textiles which require care handling procedures that suit the origin of the textiles to prevent depreciation of the products. The Zimbabwean fashion market is comprised of products that have care labels with little information pertaining to relevant care procedures (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). Some of the products have similar care labels although their fiber contents are different, while some of the products do not bear any care label information. This study therefore sought to examine the perceptions of the manufacturers on the development of clothing care labels.

Significance of the study

Textile care labeling education plays an important role in informing consumers and retailers on the appropriate methods of handling their fashion products. The knowledge attained from such education assists in stimulating improvement of clothing functions and to constantly recreate new products that can solve consumer based challenges in handling textiles. The study seeks to stimulate cooperation among the participants of the supply chain to create a platform among education sector, industry experts sector and suppliers and retailers sectors on care labeling challenges. Designers need clothing knowledge and life cycle to understand fashion products' impact on the environment and on the human body. They need to assess their fashion products'

life cycle in order to balance the impact of these products on the human body and on the environment. Many countries worldwide are making an effort to standardize the care symbols on textile products, even though the understanding and usage of care labels by clothes manufactures may be on lower levels. Developments in technology in the textile and clothing production continuously provide advanced and improved textile products or materials. Such advancements in the textile and clothing manufacturing require manufacturers to be knowledgeable of the end product performance levels so that appropriate care labels are designed.

Research question

How do Zimbabwean clothing manufacturers design their care labels?

Literature review

Textile care labeling regulation was approved by the Federal Trade Commission in 1971 to help textile consumers to get information on how to care for textile and clothing products. The care labeling regulation was revised in 1984 and it binds all manufacturers and importers of clothes and piece goods. According to Khude (2017) the objective of textile care label is to protect consumers by providing accurate information on the specific product by stating its origin, construction, quality, and care. The universal care labeling rule stipulates that the care label should be a reliable care method placed on a permanent basis and it should be a standardized label established through a combination of scientific tests, existing technical and theoretical knowledge, user experience and industry specialists (Smith, 1998).

Textile products must be labeled all the time they are put on the market as they act as a guide to consumers of these products (Joseph, 1998). The labels should be composed of name of manufacturer, description and details of fiber content. The contents may appear in written text format and in numbered statements which may be necessary although not universally

recognizable (European Union, 2017). Labels may relay more specific information about a product, particularly size measurements, and specific material components of a product. They must be readable, strongly secured and positioned where they are easily seen by users/consumers. An authorized manufacturer or agent must be responsible for provision of product care labels. The authorization of care labels supplier ensures accuracy of the information contained on the label. Thus most of the countries trading under European Union (EU) are working under the principles laid down although such countries' textile manufacturing industries work under varied environmental conditions and economic situations. Technological advancement and language to use are other factors that may need consideration in coming up with relevant textile and clothing care labels for the market. In their study Kokas-Palicska (2011) strongly suggest the need to stabilize and revamp the Hungarian textile and clothing industry by implementing enhanced innovation and by altering the product's structure, which does not spare the care labeling structure for Zimbabwe. The study reiterates the EU institutions' agreement to simplify textile labeling regulation to allow consumers to get more information on the components and care of textile products. Thus the consumer council and the European Parliament (EP) content that the EU commission should engage an in-depth research on further requirements for universal labeling which could comprise product use instructions, compulsory sizes, indication of country where the product was made and inclusion of sensitive substances, electronic labels and other technological materials included related to textile and clothing usage.

Laitala and Klepp (2013) argue that care label legislation varies with different countries. As such it should bear basic information such as fiber content and maintenance instructions and additional information encompassing product size measurements, country where product is

produced, environmental or ethical symbols, producer brand and health, and safety measure warnings, practical performance and declaration labels. Shin (2000) adds that textile care labels should be easily accessible as they provide information such as size and fabric content of the product and also the methods to be followed in caring for the product. Therefore, content on care label, placement of care label, language and symbol used on care label should be standardized as the care label provides the first interface for communication between manufacturer and consumer.

However, many products with environmental declarations like 100% natural, biodegradable and recyclable do not provide ecological attribute information and as such the products may be exposed to green washing (Dreyer et al., 2016). South Africa which is in the same region with Zimbabwe does not have accredited eco label for textile products although it has Eco- Choice Africa label (Dreyer et al., 2016) and Eco Standard South Africa for building materials and standards. Lack of eco label by this country means some products imported from South Africa have inadequate care labeling information which exposes the products to performance dissatisfaction or deformation of such products due to improper care by the consumers. However, it has merchandise Act 17 of 1941 which stipulates that all goods that fall under this act must have a label that is noticeably visible. The label must be easy to read and should bear obligatory information like country of origin, imported textile materials used to manufacture the product, fiber content, care instructions, size and manufacturer brand (Dreyer et al., 2016). The Merchandising regulation requires the textile goods to conform to the South African National Standards (SANS). Thus the country has firm labeling requirement for textile products which comply with international standards (International Trade Centre, 2010). Opposed to South Africa which abides by international and national

standards regulations in labeling textile goods, clothing in most Zimbabwean retail shops and flea markets do not bear any care information (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013). The few textile products bearing care labels mostly have symbols such as wash and iron symbols. Research work done in the area of textile care labels in Zimbabwe is mainly to do with consumer knowledge (Mupfumira & Jinga, 2013).

Failure by manufacturers to put consistent information on the care labels is also problem faced by consumers as the various clothing items are sourced from different parts of the world. The manufacturers prefer to have voluntary systems for textile care labels since they want to reduce costs usually associated with mandatory systems of care labeling (Rytz et al., 2010). Using symbols only on care labels has its benefits from the manufacturer perspective but (Yan et al., 2008) argue that consumers may prefer text that they can explicitly read. Christopher et al., (2001) and Shin (2000) report that when care labels were introduced by the FTC in 1997 most consumers did not understand though (Yan et al., 2008) commends that comprehension of these symbols used on care labels has greatly improved over the years amongst consumers.

Methodology

Research approach

The study adopted qualitative research method, a naturalistic approach that seeks to explore the phenomenon within its context in a specific setting (Grays, 2014; Creswell, 2014). The Qualitative research approach has been adopted as the study sought to obtain depth and breadth knowledge in clothing care label development. The approach enabled the researchers to effectively synthesize respondents' behavior and responses on the development of the care labels.

Research design

The study employed an exploratory case study design. This research design is an experiential inquiry which answers questions so as to address how and why. The design is relevant for studying the current phenomenon within its actual life situation and boundaries. This research design linked the data collected and conclusions drawn to the main study question as it directs action plan. The exploratory case study design entails an in-depth analysis of a single or small number of units from the population (Cresswell, 2009; Flick, 2011). The use of a case study design enabled the researchers to have a direct contact with the participants and the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014).

Population

In this study, the population comprised clothing manufacturing industry personnel in Zimbabwe. The research was undertaken in two of Zimbabwe's biggest cities, that is the capital city Harare and the second largest city Bulawayo. A total of 11 companies were purposively sampled from the two cities with Harare having 6 out of the currently 28 operational clothing manufacturing companies and 5 out of 16 in Bulawayo. In this study, interviews were carried out with quality control managers or experts responsible with care labeling in the respective organization. In-depth interviews provided an undisturbed environment to collect data as the participants might have felt more relaxed to discuss with the researchers (O'Leary, 2014). The researchers were in a position to explore and probe into several issues by capturing direct quotations about participants' personal experiences within the scope of textile care labeling in Zimbabwe. A total of five observations were done live on site to assess how the care labels are applied on various apparel products. Observation is a systematic way of recording behavioral patterns of study respondents, objects, and occurrences without communicating with them in any method (Maree, 2007). In this study the researchers observed quality of care labels,

size, position on garment and nature of information on the labels. The observation enabled the researchers to understand the care label development approaches used by the clothing production firms. Observations were carried out in order to unpack phenomena that participants could not freely talk about in the interview (Cohen et al., 2011).

Data collection, instruments and procedures

In-depth confrontation interview

The in-depth direct confrontation interview with the respondents is a set of open ended questions that yield responses about respondents' experiences, perceptions, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Cresswell, 2014). In-depth interviews presented a more comfortable environment for the researchers to collect data as the participants may have felt more relaxed to talk to the researchers (O'Leary, 2014). In this study, interviews carried out with quality control managers were useful in that detailed information about participants' thoughts and behaviors were captured. The researchers were in a position to explore and probe into several issues by capturing direct quotations about participants' personal perspectives and experiences that were central to the broad problem.

Observations

Observation is a systematic way of recording behavioral patterns of study respondents, objects, and occurrences without communicating with them in any method (Maree, 2007). In this study a total of five live on site observations were carried out following the observation guideline for the study. Convenience sampling was used to select the five companies from eleven sampled clothing manufacturing companies. These observations sought to understand the processes carried out by the various apparel manufactures when they do apply the textile garment care labels. The observations started from the production line and followed the specific product up until it has

been identified or marked as fit for dispatch to the customer. All the observations were recorded on video and some pictures of care labels were captured. The observations were done so that information like, garment side of application of the care label, size, nature of information and time taken to attach the care label were determined as well as the knowledge of the machine operators on issues related to the care label. The researchers discovered phenomena that

participants could not freely talk about in the interview (Cohen et al., 2011).

Data Analysis

Since qualitative data were collected, the data were analyzed qualitatively. The qualitative data collected were subjected to clustering in thematic areas, writing stories, tallying and ranking the responses to reveal the main issues that emerged from the study.

Findings

<i>Application/affixing of care labels onto apparel products by companies</i>		
Yes we apply	No we do not	We apply but not on all products
7	2	2

Seven respondents cited that they do apply care labels to the apparel products they produce and two cited that they do not apply the care labels to the apparel products. Also two respondents cited that they do apply care labels but not on all products and one of them answered that, “*Yes we apply care labels but depends with the customer request or demands*”. The respondents further explained that some customers request to have specially designed care labels showing their company logo. One respondent also cited that some big fashion retailers like Edgars and Topics specifically request the manufacturer to have care label. One of the respondents who do not put labels regularly on every product responded this way, “*we do not apply on all garments, we only apply when we get a new fabric in production and also when the product is made of a mixture of different fabrics*”.

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supplier information and this is usually affixed to the fabric roll they buy highlighting the fiber content of the fabric roll. One respondent also cited that at their organization they use their individual experience which they have amassed working with different fabrics in coming up with a care label. Two respondents cited that they get the information to put on the care label from their final retail customers like Edgars as these have their own quality control standards and expectations.

Use of guiding standards for care labels

Of the 11 respondents who took part in this study 7 of them cited that they do not necessarily follow any guidelines when it comes to the design or generation of the apparel care labels. One respondent did cite that they do follow the international standards on the type and symbols that they use at their company and the respondent further reports that they are more aligned to the British standards. The other three respondents cites that they do have a quality control department that has the responsibility of coming up with the relevant informative care label for all the apparel products they produce. These are the guiding standards that they then follow in the production line. Amongst the three respondents who depend on their quality control department one reports that “ *in*

Zimbabwe our local standards board responsible for the formulation of these guidelines on apparel care labels has not come up with the comprehensive guide thus we depend on retail giants like Edgars to give us their guidelines”.

Tests carried to generate the care labels

All the respondents did report that they carry out some tests on the products they produce to determine the various fabric features like bleeding, fastness and strength. The respondents cite that they carry out the following tests wash test, shrinkage test, crocking test, and the temperature or iron test. The frequency of these tests depend upon company to company as they do not have a hard and fast rule as only one company cites that they do carry out all tests on every fabric consignment they receive.

Review of information on the care labels

One respondent cite that they do review the information they put on their care labels every 5 years. Another respondent also cite they do carry out reviews but only when they get new fabric and also consider changing customer demands and expectation with regards to care labels. The other nine respondents do not carry out any reviews as they cite they keep purchasing their fabric from the same supplier and they state or rather buy same type all the times.

Challenges in generating care labels

The costs incurred in the printing of the care labels were cited as one of the major challenges faced by the apparel manufacturers. One respondent also cited that the time to order and getting the care labels ready for use is usually a challenge to the apparel manufacturers as they might need to do a small order and need to quickly complete. *“In some cases the care labels get delivered when you we are halfway through the order and we just start to apply the care labels on those products left as we need to reach the target order”*. Lack of capacity (machinery) to carry out exhaustive tests on the fabric is also a major problem. Some respondents also cited that the fabric

manufacturers are not giving them sufficient information when it comes to the fiber content of the fabric they will have purchased. Also the top management in some of these companies does not see the value of these care labels thus they do not monitor their application or use in the company. One respondent reports that when in some cases they get oversupplied with these care labels and they cannot simply throw or destroy them so they end up applying them on similar products they deem fit. The other challenge cited by the respondents is how and where the care label is affixed onto the apparel product and its size also.

Solving the problems faced

Though the apparel manufacturers do face problems in the generation of apparel care labels they have the solutions that if applied can be useful. It was suggested that the manufacturers need to lobby the local standards board (SAZ) to make it mandatory to have certain information on all apparel care labels for those products destined for our local Zimbabwean market. One respondent had this to say, *“Let’s promote No care label No business and retailers need to return all non-tagged apparel products”*. The respondents also said there should be workshops to educate and share information amongst the apparel manufactures with a strong emphasis on importance of apparel care labels. Such workshops should educate the manufactures on current developments in terms of handling the fabric, washing methods and detergents to use and the technological advances in the industrial and domestic laundering equipment now used by the consumers.

Findings from observations

In all the five companies observations were made on two products where they were tracked from the first stage of garment production to the point where they are ready for dispatch to the customer. Time taken for each product on the production line varied depending on the process requirements for each apparel product.

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The size of the care label was different in dimensions from one company to the other. The size of the care labels also differed depending on garment and fabric quality. Some of the labels were too small to the extent that the information was difficult to read especially on the text. On other care labels the care symbol would be legible enough for the user to see but the accompanying text was too small to read. On other observations carried out it was noted that some products were simply attached with the garment size label and the fashion brand only without care label. Some of the care labels had little information such as “*wash dark colors separately*” or “*use warm iron only*” as the only care information for the garment. It was also observed that some garments were affixed with brand tags of different fashion labels and the employees referred to these as the care labels.

Discussion

The findings on whether clothing manufacturers apply care labels to their products reflect that the Zimbabwean clothing manufacturers used their discretion to attach labels on the products. This presents rather a mismanaged area in terms of product and consumer safety. The manufacturer is not accountable for the performance of the product. Application of care labels upon customer request means those customers without knowledge on importance of care labels and fabric performance would not bother to request for the labels though they may not get satisfaction on the performance of the product. Such clients may end up throwing away their apparel products they will have failed to correctly care for especially after the first wash and drying cycle. Thus this study strongly advocates for reinforcement mechanisms to have all apparel products tagged with care procedures to provide adequate know how on handling of products by consumers. Smith (1998) argues that the care label should be a reliable care method placed permanently on the product and all apparel manufactures have to develop

information that will make this care label as detailed as possible to minimize customer dissatisfaction.

The study findings also reflect that most clothing manufacturers in Zimbabwe do not consider importance of having meaningful care labels on their products since only one company out of the 11 sampled companies carry out tests to design clothing care labels. Some of these companies argue on the cost implications when it comes to the development and design of these care labels and thus they shun this process. But it should be noted that carrying out tests on purchased fabrics enables them to come up with informative care labels that assist the end user of the product. The absence of fabric testing equipment was cited as a major reason for failure to test fabrics for development of accurate care labels and in cases where the equipment is available either they have challenges in manpower to do correct procedures or it's not working. Such challenges present a critical scenario on consumer rights as textile care labeling rule stipulates that all textile products must be adequately labeled all the time they are put on the market (EU, 2017; Joseph, 1998). All the study respondents cited that there are no national guiding standards followed by clothing manufacturers in Zimbabwe in development and application of care labels on clothing products. Lack of guiding standards leads to haphazard labeling procedures and use of various designs of care labels, use various designs of labels, different positions of application, and application of inadequate care information on most care labels affixed on most clothing products. Absence and inadequate care information subsidizes the quality of a product as consumers do not properly care for the purchased product, resulting in product depreciation well before its life span. It is important for the Zimbabwe clothing manufacturers' board to design care labeling legislation since clothing labeling procedures and label contents varies with different countries due to diverse environmental conditions (Laitala & Klepp,

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2013). Coming up with clothing product care labeling legislation brings sanity in the clothing business as this would help strengthen the link between manufacturers and the consumers, and also improve clothing production value chain.

Clothing care labeling legislation may be of high value as its guidelines would reveal the expected contents of the care label and would also spell out when the labels are subject to review. Regular review of the clothing care labels is necessary to meet developments in fiber and fabric production triggered by technological advancement and consumer needs, although most clothing manufacturers cited that they do not review care label content because the buy fabrics from the same supplier. Production of sustainable clothing products also, require regular review of care labels so that consumers respond positively to sustainable care procedures in related to changes in climatic conditions due to global warming. However, the sampled clothing manufacturers cited a number challenges they face to come up with quality clothing care labels.

The challenges being faced by the clothing manufacturers with regard to designing and application of care labels reflect that the manufacturers are incapacitated to design quality care labels. The lack of equipment and knowledge on the design and position to fix care labels reflect lack of commitment among the production management since there is no clothing care label legislation that would enforce them to apply appropriate labels on their products. If they would value their consumers, they would allocate resources to seek training on how to design and affix care labels their products. They would also seek ways of simplifying the care instructions and symbols to allow consumers to understand and gain more information on the care of textile products (Kokas-Paliska, 2011). Regular enhancement of care labels is relevant to meet innovations in textile material production such as nano and eco textiles.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the clothing manufacturers in Zimbabwe do not adequately value application of care labels on their products since most of them rely on consumer requests on whether to apply or not to apply the labels on the products. Therefore, the manufacturers are faced with challenges of funding for acquiring fabric testing equipment and time to design and time to meet order due dates. The study found that there is need for reinforcement on application of quality clothing care labels by manufacturers, which suggests designing of policy and or development of care labeling legislation for textile products produced by Zimbabwean manufacturers.

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