

Social Responsibility in Environmental Protection of Clothing Brands in China: A Case Study of ANTA

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Abstract. Corporate social responsibility was proposed by Bowen in 1953, but Chinese companies began to attach importance to it in the 21st century. China is a big exporter of clothing and textiles in the world, but there is little research on the social responsibility of Chinese clothing companies. Environmental problems have always been hot and arduous. The process of clothing production will cause a lot of negative impacts on the environment, so environmental protection is an important social responsibility of textile and clothing enterprises. Through the case study of Anta Group, this study discusses how Chinese clothing companies can enhance their sense of social responsibility and become environment-friendly companies. The significance and specific feasible methods of the clothing companies to carry out green activities are mentioned in this paper. This study provides some ideas for other companies on how to fulfill their social responsibilities through a successful case of a large company. We hope that through case analysis, more enterprises will pay attention to environmental responsibility and more research will focus on corporate social responsibility in China.

Keywords: Company social responsibility; environmental protection; clothing company.

1. Introduction

While fashion drives rapid economic development, the pollution caused by textile and clothing production cannot be underestimated. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published that the garment industry is responsible for 10% of annual global carbon emissions, become the second most polluting industry after the oil industry [1]. According to figures from the World Resources Institute (2017), about 20% of industrial water pollution is due to garment manufacturing [2]. GRID-Arendal, a United Nations Environment Programme partner, reported that clothes are one of many sources of ocean plastic waste [3].

China is a major country in the production and export of textiles and clothing. According to information published by the UN Comtrade Database, China supplied about 25% of textiles and 33% of clothing to the global market in 2007, and China exported \$75.6 billion of “other made up textile articles” in 2020 [4]. The Chinese government encourages textile companies to take environmental protection and sustainable development as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Specifically, the Corporate Sustainability Compact for Textile and Apparel Industry (CSC9000T), developed by CNTAC in 2005, is China’s first code of conduct on social responsibility as well as the first sustainability management system [5].

In recent decades, many scholars have made contributions in exploring the CSR of the Chinese textile and clothing industry and environmental issues or sustainability. Most of the companies interviewed appeared to be working hard to improve the environment, but ignored it when developing new products. If there are no benefits or penalties, companies are not very interested in participating in CSR [6]. The CSR movement of textile companies will benefit China's economic growth and the sustainable development of the global textile supply chain [7]. The vast majority of companies surveyed have a strong sense of ethical responsibility for sustainable development, but only a small percentage of them have clear goals and structures for this [8].

There has been less previous analysis of CSR in environmental protection of Chinese garment enterprises, and the impact of related activities on the companies. ANTA Group, a leading garment manufacturing company in China, has been principally engaging in the design, development, manufacturing and marketing of ANTA sportswear series to provide the mass market in China with professional sporting products including footwear, apparel and accessories [9]. This research focused on the environmental protection activities of Anta Group, and analyzes whether these can be promoted to other similar companies. The overall goal of this research was to pursue more textile and clothing companies involved in environmental protection and the promotion of industry sustainability.

2. CSR in China

CSR reports in China is still at a very early stage but is making continuous progress [10]. The Chinese government has played an important role in the process of building corporate social responsibility. According to Article 5 of the 2006 China Company Law, companies must assume social responsibilities in their business activities. According to the Guidelines for Environmental Information Disclosure of Listed Companies issued in May 2008, environmental sustainability should be displayed in a company's CSR report. In 2008, China National Textile and Apparel Council released the China Sustainable Development Report Review Rules and Instructions, which provide the measurement principles and review procedures for the quality of CSR reports of textile and garment enterprises. The Environmental Information Disclosure Law promulgated by the State Environmental Protection Administration of China requires disclosure of environmental information.

Some scholars have studied the relationship between corporate environmental responsibility-related behavior with profitability or with consumers. By studying 2,827 Chinese listed companies from 2007 to 2011, it was indicated that environmental management would significantly improve future profitability, but it would not have a significant impact on current financial performance [11]. By surveying consumers in the 1990s and 2000s, it was found that sustainable fashion products are positively associated with purchasing behavior and that their characteristics determine whether consumers choose to buy [12]. Most studies show that companies (especially large-scale companies) that actively participate in environmental protection actions and actively fulfill their social responsibilities will receive better market repercussions. As one of the top apparel manufacturing groups in China, ANTA has been committed to environmental protection for many years. The following will analyze how ANTA fulfills its CSR from different perspectives.

3. Environmental Protection Project of ANTA

With the continuous development of the economy, more and more consumers are aware of the importance of environmental protection. The gradual improvement of consumer preferences and corporate social responsibility has driven clothing brands to invest more in environmental protection technology innovation to upgrade environmental protection, establish more sustainable development projects, and participate in the activities of internationally renowned environmental protection organizations. As a leading environmental protection enterprise in China, Anta Group mainly adopts two methods of innovative green materials and cooperation with environmental protection organizations when adhering to the sustainable development strategy.

3.1 Creating New Green Clothing Materials

ANTA has taken a proactive approach to assume its corporate social responsibility in the fields of environmental protection, especially the continuous research and develop high-tech eco-friendly fabrics. Anta made a preliminary exploration of high-tech environment-friendly fabrics, and he launched the first environment-friendly clothing series inspired by lotus leaf bionics in 2017. The A-Rain Breaker Technology series is based on a fluorine-free waterproofing technology in which the water repellent is extracted from plants. So far, Anta has introduced the concept of fluorine-free

environmental protection into China for the first time, and become the first company to apply fluorine-free waterproof technology to produce products. Then Anta aims at the direction of waste recycling. In 2019, the training with Plastic Rousing Energy Technology series of eco-friendly clothing products, takes recycled waste plastic bottles as raw material to produce recycled polyester fiber fabrics, resulting in bringing forward new approaches to the degradation of plastic bottles. Moreover, the cost of this new environmental protection technology is 30% - 50% lower than that of other international brands. This series of products has been widely praised by the market after being launched, further improving the market share of the enterprise. Due to the success of Rousing Energy Technology, Anta Group launched eco-friendly S. Cafe series in March 2020 to recycle coffee grounds. It is treated in an environmentally friendly way, turning coffee grounds into biodegradable environment-friendly fabrics. In 2020, Anta launched the first environment-friendly footwear product-- BADA0 Eco-friendly Shoes series. It is made of biodegradable leather, recyclable fly-woven fabrics, and mesh parts, resulting in minimal loss of resources and maximum optimization of resource allocation.

On the other hand, Anta also considers the environmental protection of materials used in the production process. ANTA Group has been adopting organic cotton in large quantities since as early as 2010 to achieve a pollution-free textile process in its products, which has effectively fulfilled the massive consumer demand for eco-friendly clothing. In 2014, ANTA introduced fabrics made from DuPont's SORONA eco-fiber into its apparel production, which has reduced resource consumption and waste pollution by a significant amount compared to polyamide fiber materials. Moreover, ANTA has strongly advocated the application of benzene-free glue, of which 99% of the shoes produced by the ANTA Group are made with this water-based eco-friendly glue.

3.2 Cooperating with Environmental Organizations

There is a relationship called 'Green alliances' which is a relationship that exists between the environmental organization and the company and this relationship can be a helpful strategy for the company to combine its responsibility with the market goal [13]. Until today, this strategy is still used by ANTA group as it has become a global strategic partner of the world's largest environmental NGO ---- World Wildlife Fund (WWF) since August 2020. Three core areas of cooperation have been identified, which include protecting biodiversity, improving the supplier environment, and developing sustainable products that protect the environment. The two parties cooperated to build 600 acres of "ANTA Forest" in the suburbs of Beijing, which helped the environmental protection and restoration of forests around Beijing, and make Carbon-neutral. At the same time, they provided funds for the first finless porpoise patrol competition in the Yangtze River Basin, which promoted the professionalization of the Yangtze River patrol work. ANTA Group also participated in the donation of a Yangtze finless porpoise-themed wetland science museum in Jiefang Park, Wuhan, the first Yangtze finless porpoise-themed intelligent interactive science museum in Central China. The two parties will jointly promote the Textile Factory Assessment and Improvement System (FAIS) and jointly develop and promote innovative solutions for green transformation in the textile industry to achieve better supply chain management and collaborative action across the industry. In addition, ANTA and WWF participated in the activity of "Helping COP15 Youth Participate in the Biodiversity Conservation Process under the Convention on Biological Diversity - Solution Selection" with students from 50 colleges and universities in 16 provinces, mobilizing Chinese youth to participate and practice from a global perspective. The concept of building a community of life on earth.

In March 2022, ANTA and WWF announced the second phase of their public welfare project to continue to promote the "Moving to Nature" environmental protection concept. Firstly, Anta Group will continue to promote the use of the FAIS system for self-assessment in textile factories and the participation of suppliers in the FAIS system, leading the industry in supply chain improvement and promoting sustainable development and supply chain transformation in ANTA and the textile industry. Secondly, the protection of endangered species and biodiversity is the top priority of the second phase of cooperation. ANTA has selected the Northeast tiger as the key endangered species for this cooperation and will continue to improve the ecological chain of the Northeast tiger, conduct

surveys on the current habitat of the Northeast tiger, and reduce the threat posed by human activities to the survival of the Northeast tiger. At the same time, we will continue to fund and protect porpoise reserves to reverse the extinction trend. Finally, the ANTA Group and WWF will carry out forest restoration initiatives in parts of the Northeast. The Wangqing area will be used as a model to start ecological activities based on Plant condition survey, restoring degraded woodlands, and restoring local landscapes. Moreover, they also supported the development of the green development service platform for the textile industry, drove nearly 40 knittings, printing, and dyeing factories to use the system to carry out environmental diagnosis and improvement work, and promoted the more sustainable development of the textile industry. Through its brand influence, ANTA promotes environmental protection knowledge and the concept of "Moving to Nature", helping to create symbiotic values for the environment and society.

4. Win-win Relationship: Green Activities & Clothing Companies

For companies, the main purpose is to make profits and expand operations. Patagonia has invested a lot of money in environmental protection, doubled its scale of operations, and tripled its profits since 2008 [14], which shows the huge profit of using eco-friendly strategies. Besides helping the company to gain big returns, those green behaviours also bring other benefits, firstly, reduce the cost by providing products such as reducing waste, saving energy and reusing the materials. Also, these can help to reduce the long-term risk in the following aspects: depletion of the resources, fluctuation of the energy cost and the management of waste and pollution [15]. Also, when the company develops the green strategy, its external benefits will increase, such as increasing its sales and increasing the competitiveness and reputation of the company. Continuous environmental protection publicity will increase the recognition and support of a company by society and consumers. Today, more and more consumers pay attention to eco-friendly products, packaging, and management styles [15], enterprises often use environmental advertising to attract Chinese consumers' interest and consumers' green purchasing intention has a positive impact [16]. He observed that these environmentally-conscious consumers have incorporated environmental factors into their purchasing decisions [16]. And also, consumers are willing to pay the premium according to the function or the responsibility to the environment of the product [17]. The company's promotion of green products produced and environmental protection projects it participates in can improve consumers' favorability and market visibility. Most firms have started using a sustainable development framework which is known as green marketing. The company can impress a positive image on the consumers, and having a good reputation has been justified as being beneficial to the company [18]. Furthermore, Green products can influence consumers' purchasing decisions [19]. Besides, the company always consider the green strategy as an opportunity to get support from the government, for example, financial support, which can also help them to invest in more technology to reduce waste and raise their reputation.

At the same time, from the perspective of the environmental organisation, green marketing is also beneficial. There is a relationship called 'Green alliances' which is a relationship that exists between the environmental organisation and the company and this relationship can be a helpful strategy for the company to combine their responsibility with the market goal [20]. Being an alliance with some nongovernmental environmental organisations is beneficial for the company in the developing country since in these countries the unsure social culture and regulation will bring a higher risk of the investment. These Green alliances can provide a bridge between the important but distant stakeholders and the company [21]. Under this relationship, the environmental organisation can keep their ecophilosophy and the company business strategy at the same level, especially for the ecocentric organisation needs to construct a legal partnership with the company to help to reduce the risk of reputation loss, for instance, use their cooperation as a tool to pursuit the ecophilosophical vision [22].

5. Feasible Methods for other companies

First of all, clothing enterprises should establish the concept of green environmental protection and integrate the concept of environmental protection into the corporate culture. It can combine its company strategy with the suggestions of the local community and new policies. The senior management of the Company shall formulate the development goals related to green environmental protection and strengthen the training of employees' environmental awareness. Also, for the employees, the company need to pay for the employees and make the factory have proper lighting, windows and ventilation and make sure the fabric they used is from an ethical and reliable manufacturer which can provide the space for the workers to take a rest and proper working conditions. Besides, the company need to provide the opportunity for the workers the special training to develop their skills and offer them a promotion in their career. At the same time, the company need to obey the local rules and make changes when they fail to do so. During the designing process, they can firstly roughly calculate the number of materials and waste, the way to draw the pattern and the cost of the human. Second, enterprises should increase their investment in R&D of innovative green environmental protection products and constantly improve their own scientific and technological level, which will not only improve their popularity, environmental protection, and product quality but also reduce costs in the production process and further improve product competitiveness. Third, enterprises should adhere to cleaner production and try to choose clean energy such as solar energy and wind energy to drive the operation of machines; The enterprise adopts production technology and efficient production equipment with less waste and no waste to reduce the emission of harmful gases, wastewater, and other pollutants at the root; Reduce various risk factors and toxic and harmful intermediate products in the production process, such as glue containing formaldehyde. They can choose sustainable materials such as natural fibres (cotton and bamboo) to lower the impact on the environment. Also, the company can consider the service life of the product and use the proper textile to reduce stains and the need for specialist cleaning. They can choose inks and dyes that are non-toxic and natural. Avoid fabrics that are made from fossil fuels. Besides, the company can reduce pattern-making waste. A pattern with no obvious beginning and end can be chosen to use since it is more useful for all the lengths of the clothes. Secondly, enterprises can provide their brands with a platform for recycling and re-leasing second-hand clothing, to extend the service life of clothing through the borrowing, leasing, and recycling of clothing. Besides, use workers who are ethical during the manufacturing if possible since they can be easier to understand the eco-friendly strategy and also use some easy-understandable labels on the clothes to help the customers to understand the life of the clothes and avoid discarding them prematurely. Plus, the company need to reduce the waste of packaging and can try to find some local service to recycle the packaging. In addition, enterprises should strengthen their contact with government or non-governmental environmental protection organizations and participate in some activities to protect the ecological environment. In addition to the production of products, strengthen the connection with society and improve their sense of social responsibility. Finally, after the products are produced, the end treatment is also required, which requires enterprises to develop some practical environmental protection technologies that are advanced in technology, have good treatment effects, can recover useful substances, and are conducive to the organization of material recycling. Make it a final means to prevent pollution after taking other measures.

6. CONCLUSION

In the context of consumers' increasing concern for environmental protection goods and the Chinese government's gradual improvement of corporate social responsibility, we conducted a case study of Anta Group. Through Anta's activities and contributions to environmental protection in recent decades, we first discussed the benefits of fulfilling social responsibility to enterprises, and then analyzed how other clothing companies should learn from Anta's practices. The conclusions are summarized as follows:

1.The concept of corporate social responsibility was introduced late in China, but the Chinese government and relevant departments have continuously improved and updated the standards and norms for CSR in the past two decades. Especially in the clothing manufacturing industry, there are complete and detailed official regulations to manage and supervise companies.

2.Anta Group has been committed to the research and development of environment-friendly materials and the optimization of green production lines. As a leading clothing company in China with a large market share, its practices are undoubtedly taken as an example. Large scale enterprises should be more active in fulfilling their social responsibilities to drive other companies.

3.After investing in environmental protection projects, garment manufacturing companies will also reap many benefits, such as popularity in the market, consumers' first choice, and total profits with growth trends.

4.There are many ways for garment manufacturing companies to fulfill their environmental protection responsibilities, such as using degradable or recyclable raw materials, reducing waste emissions in production through new technologies, incorporating the concept of environmental protection into corporate culture, investing in or holding green projects, etc.

This study also has limitations. For instance, there are many kinds of clothing with different manufacturing processes and processes, but this study did not separate them. In future research, we will further study the social responsibility activities of clothing companies under a more detailed classification.

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