

Marketing Strategy of Sustainable Fashion B Corporations: Case Studies in China

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Abstract: The B Corporation (also referred as B Corp) movement is a relatively new phenomenon in China, with many verified B Corporations falling into the sustainable fashion or sustainable textile category. This paper aims to study these sustainable fashion B Corporations in China (SFBCs) from a marketing strategy perspective. To achieve this, the paper conducted effective qualitative research on 7 SFBCs, based on a substantial review of existing literature on sustainable fashion marketing. The qualitative research included analyses of secondary data on SFBCs, as well as interviews with relevant staff and on-site observations. Purposive sampling was also used to collect primary data (N=56) in order to explore relevant consumer behaviour for SFBCs products. The study found a mismatch between the supply and demand in terms of sustainability and affordability consciousness. To address this, the paper developed a tool called the Affordability-Sustainability Segments to clarify the positions of SFBCs and provide suggestions for their future development. The study of SFBCs can serve as a guide for the development of other B Corporations in China, particularly those in the sustainable fashion and textile industry.

1. Introduction

The B Corporation in Chinese Mainland is a new phenomenon, but its development is at an increasing rate. Since the establishment of B Lab in 2017, the certified B Corporations in China reached nearly 30 as of 2021[26], but the number has achieved 46 by April 2023[5]. The author is interested in how these B Corporations will grow while balancing the interests of various stakeholders such as investors, workers, communities, and environments. Given different size, political context, social and cultural background, these enterprises may not grow as expected as what the counterparts in western countries have achieved in the B Corporation field.

The popularity of sustainable fashion is on the rise among consumers [45], which is also evidenced by a growing number of fashion brands such as Chloé Wolf & Badge, Cotopaxi joining the B Corp community to showcase their dedication towards sustainable and socially responsible business practices. In fact, out of the 46 B Corporations in China, about 10 can be categorized as of sustainable fashion. In this paper, sustainable fashion is defined broadly and interchangeably with sustainable textiles, encompassing items such as clothing, bags, and even sanitary pads. The study

of this paper will focus on sustainable fashion B Corporations, choosing 7 out of the 10 companies as case studies, in order to shed some light on the whole B Corporations development in China.

The scope of study is further narrowed down to the marketing strategy of such selected sustainable fashion companies. Marketing is essential in creating brand identity, promoting sustainable practices, and attracting investors for B Corporation-certified companies. With most sustainable fashion B Corporations in China being startups, business development and marketing are vital for their growth. Taking a marketing perspective in this study provides an effective approach to examine how SFBCs (sustainable fashion B Corporations in China) can effectively promote sustainable practices and build brand identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Sustainable Fashion Marketing Strategies Research

The marketing strategies of SF (sustainable fashion) research can be approached from two aspects: a) how SF enterprises develop and implement marketing strategies, which is often centered around social retailing marketing, b) the consumer behavior of SF products.

2.1.1 The Social Retailing Marketing

The main focus of SRM (Social Retailing Marketing) papers is to explore how traditional retail marketing strategies can be used to incorporate SF into mainstream fashion. SRM research encompasses four key areas: branding, communication tactics, marketing materials, and the barriers that hinder the widespread adoption of sustainable fashion brands[35].

With regard to branding, it is found that sustainability may not be a top priority for all consumers when buying clothes, which poses a significant challenge for sustainable fashion brands trying to win over consumers[17]. There are different ways to market sustainable fashion, such as making it fashionable[6], commo[40], fun[50], and luxury brand experiences[2] [32]for SF. Strategies also include using endorsements[10][23], stories and anti-consumption ads[30][31]. More research is needed to see which strategies work best and don't backfire for sustainable fashion brands to succeed in the long term.

In terms of communication channels, studies suggest that both online and offline channels are important for sustainable fashion retailing. Physical locations give consumers a chance to experience sustainable fashion and challenge their preconceptions[38], while social media is one of the most-used channel to reach consumers and foster brand loyalty[15][16][25][33][36][48].

As to marketing material, most research on marketing material related to sustainable fashion has focused on using hang tags to educate consumers at the point of sale[47][49]. Clear and accurate labeling is crucial to avoid confusion and greenwashing [13]. Digital technologies, such as apps that reveal the source of an item, have also been suggested to provide more engaging and detailed information[46].

For the barriers that hinder the influence of SF, research reveals the challenges such as educating consumers about the value of sustainable fashion, and telling them why they should pay more for it [17], uncertainty about the effectiveness of existing certifications [37], and slim profit margins [6]. Branding and consumer education are crucial for sustainable fashion brands to succeed. However, brands must also strike a balance between traditional retail marketing methods and truly embodying the values of sustainable fashion.

2.1.2 Consumer Behavior

The consumer behavior literature has identified drivers and barriers to sustainable fashion consumption. Some consumers seek sustainability as a way to break free from the pressure to consume and to express their individual style [28]. Some have abandoned fast fashion due to lower product quality, a desire to support local brands, and lack of creativity and originality in clothing choice[24]. However, lack of convenience, accessibility, and visibility, as well as perceived unfashionability and high prices, are significant barriers to SF consumption [9][39], which is echoed by the recent study in UAE[34]. Research indicates that consumers tend to make fashion purchasing decisions based on appearance/style, functionality, quality, and price, with sustainability attributes ranking lower on the list [8][28]. Therefore, social enterprises selling sustainable fashion need to ensure that their products meet aesthetic and style requirements, in addition to being sustainable.

Social norms and pressure are found as drivers of SF consumption [17][19], but it is also found that these norms and pressure have limited effects on SF consumption because those who practice it are already convinced of its legitimacy [22].

Consumers may perceive sustainable fashion as a premium product, and while many are willing to pay more for it, they may still have difficulty justifying the higher prices[43]. Cultural aspects such as class, race, gender, and power also create tensions for consumers committing to sustainable fashion [18][42]. To encourage sustainable fashion consumption, further research is necessary to explore these cultural aspects and systemic issues instead of solely focusing on individual practices.

2.2 Marketing Strategy for B Corporations and Social Enterprises

While there may be some overlap between sustainable fashion and B Corporations, a more in-depth review of marketing strategies specifically for B Corporations is necessary to serve the purpose of this paper. As there is limited literature on B Corporation marketing, this review will investigate the marketing strategies of social enterprises, which share some similarities with B Corporations. By analyzing the marketing strategies of social enterprises, we can gain insights that may be relevant to B Corporations and sustainable fashion or consumption[4] [44].

With regard to B Corporation marketing, only some scholars have done research on consumers' motivation on B Corp products. It is found that the main reasons people consume products from B Corporations are social and environmental responsibility, personal satisfaction, and health-related benefits [7]. Consumers prioritize social and environmental values when choosing to purchase from B Corporations, and certification provides confidence in the effectiveness of their social and environmental contributions. Additionally, personal benefits such as being an agent of change and having access to healthy and high-quality products are also important motivators for consumers.

When it comes to SEs (social enterprises), according to Bandyopadhyay et.al's systematic review[3], some features of SE marketing can be highlighted in following aspects.

a) Cost-benefit strategy. It is comparable to Entrepreneurial Marketing (EM), which aims to create value for customers in a resource-scarce environment, and inbound marketing[29], which prioritizes being found by customers rather than pushing products to them. In a bottom-up way, SEs heavily rely on personal networks[14], including social media[50], to establish their presence and visibility.

b) The challenge of balancing profits with social and environmental responsibilities[41]. This is unlike conventional businesses that prioritize financial gain through increased sales. SEs' marketing processes combine both economic and social elements to meet the competing needs of stakeholders. There is little understanding of how SEs manage this conflicting identity and build brand associations with different stakeholders.

c) Diverse and contextual marketing. While recent attempts have been made to understand SEM practices, little is known about the diverse marketing approaches adopted by SEs in different situations. Future research should compare SEM practices in different contexts because the age of SEs, as well as their experience and reputation, may influence their marketing techniques.

d) Distribution. SEs use distribution channels to reach their target customers, much like conventional businesses. However, SEs tend to adopt ad hoc and unplanned distribution approaches. Unlike conventional marketers who seek to find compatible distributor-retailer networks, SEs prioritize channels that are low cost, convenient, and simple. This may involve using community-based channels, participating in fairs, institutional sales, and online marketing.

e) Pricing. SEs typically use a unique pricing mechanism due to the nature of their products and production processes. Their products are often handmade, use organic agricultural processes, and involve rare or region-specific raw materials that are ethically sourced, leading to longer production times and higher production costs, resulting in higher selling prices. However, some SEs also adopt a differential and participative pricing scheme.

f) Promotion. Conventional businesses rely on branding, advertising, celebrity endorsements, and sales promotions to promote their products to customers. On the other hand, SEs have a dual promotional strategy that focuses on both sales promotion and creating awareness for non-users about social and environmental issues and how their products can help address them[1]. However, SEs tend to prioritize highlighting the quality aspects of their products over their social benefits [12].

The study of sustainable fashion from the SEs perspectives [4] suggests that social enterprises selling sustainable fashion products should focus on three main aspects in their positioning strategy: (i) emphasizing the authenticity of their products and business processes, (ii) incorporating local and traditional design elements into their products, and (iii) creating a compelling story for their products that connects with their target market.

The theoretical insights from the literature above lay foundation for the subsequent study for qualitative research of SFBCs and relevant consumer behavior.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

1) What are differences among these selected SFBCs for case studies, which cause their marketing strategy to vary? What can the B Corp verification contribute to the development of the SFBCs?

2) What are consumers' purchasing attitude and behavior toward such fashion B Corporation in China (SFBC) brands?

3) What suggestions can this study propose for future development of the SFBCs based related qualitative study?

3.2 SFBC Research

Out of the 46 B Corporations, 7 SFBCs were selected for case study (See table 1). The selected SFBCs are of varying sizes, with employee counts ranging from under-50 to over-300, which in part reveals their financial capability of marketing endeavor. In addition, the durability of history also denotes the strength of brands; the longer a firm has been there, the more likely it is that its customers are aware of it.

Table 1: Sustainable Fashion B Corporation (SFBC) Selection List

No.	Name	Main products	No. employees	Year of Setup
1	Plastic Ecological Transformation (P.E.T)	plastic-recycled products	<50	2018
2	Norlha Co., Ltd Textiles	scarves and clothing handwoven Tibetan products	>150	2006
3	HowBottle	plastic-recycled products	<50	2016
4	GIVINGBACK	recreating the "abandoned billboard cloth" with fashion	<50	2017
5	YICHANG BIORIGINAL ORGANICS LTD	organic textile affordable	<50	2018
6	KOKOLU	recycled plastic fashion	<50	2018
7	ZUCZUG	encompassing a number of brands, including klee klee for environment-friendliness	>300	2001

Qualitative research is applied to these companies, research methods including analysis of the company website and brochures, media reports, etc., online communications with some companies (text messages, email), and on-site interview with some company employees and direct observations where applicable.

3.3 Customer Behavior Study

The population of consumers who choose sustainable fashion is relatively small when compared to mainstream fashion consumers. Therefore, a purposive sampling method, supplemented by snowball sampling, was used to identify and recruit participants for a qualitative study of sustainable fashion consumers. Questionnaires were developed based on the theoretical insights extracted from the literature review. Surveyees include people working in NGOs, social enterprises, outdoor sports players, and those that demonstrate or indicate their interest in social and environmental issues.

4. Discussions

4.1 SFBC Development and Marketing Endeavor

Mature brands such as Zuczug and Norlha have already established a strong brand identity, and have gained considerable customer awareness and loyalty through their competitive product quality and unique designs. As a result, these brands can command higher prices for their products. Norlha has built a reputation for exclusivity and luxury, while Zuczug prioritizes design and craftsmanship, both of which contribute to higher prices.

In contrast, other brands are still struggling to enhance their brand recognition and gain customer trust and loyalty. These brands often rely on various marketing tactics to improve their visibility in the market (as shown in Table 2).

It is noteworthy that matured brands (such as Zuczug and Norlha) use offline stores as their main distributional channel, while many start-up brands use their personal or business network, ad hoc way to expand their business. This finding echoes the points of reviewed literature [6][14]. In particular, P.E.T utilizes their social enterprise network to specialize in “B2B” business, providing gift commodities or team building products for big companies or philanthropic foundations. Givingback, a brand created by an advertising company to redesign and reuse billboard cloth, found its customers easily among its business partners in the advertising circle. Furthermore, promotion

efforts are also associated with available resources or investments. For example, Kokolu received its first round venture capital investments, and as a result, their promotions on social media are frequent, and they are actively planning to expand their offline stores overseas.

Table 2: The marketing strategies of these firms in the framework of 4ps marketing mix.

Number	Name	Products	Pricing	Place	Promotion
1	P.E.T (Plastic Ecological Transformation)	tailored products, pre-order and long delivery, highlight the environmental friendliness	Penetration affordable	online,	forum, public relation, no video, blog, and advocacy
2	Norlha Textiles	high-end rich product-line luxury-like rich product-line	high	Both online and offline 5 stores	Video about communities, image with wilde and mysterious theme, VIP discounts for long term and repeated purchasing
3	HOWBOTTLE	rich product-line limited productline	middle	online store; buyer shop; taiwan, Hong Kong	Promoting via video on social media; cobranding; podcasts; blog/Vlog storytelling
4	GIVINGBACK	limited productline limited productline	middle	mainly offerline sale; online platform	public events, promoting via business network
5	YICHANG BIORIGINAL ORGANICS	limited productline rich product-line	middle & Affordable	manily onlineshop, online -platform, local offline platform	blog dissemination, membership discounts
6	KOKOLU	rich product-line sustainable fashion brand along	moderate and high	online, cross-boarder business, oversea store	social media promotion Key opinion leader; beauty-image design
7	ZUCZUG	encompassing other non-sustainable fashion brands	high	offline 40 franchises; online store	word of mouth customer showcase user-generated video

4.1.1 Branding Approaches

For sustainable fashion brands, the brands can be built in two approaches: “sustainability” and “fashion”. While “sustainability” involves the storytelling about supply chain, communities, and environment, and “fashion” can often be associated with stylishness, feelings of materials and forms. The 7 SFBCs, with either or both of the two approaches, have found their own path of branding. Norlha can be regarded as a benchmark firm in both sustainability and fashion. The unique yak wool fibre and designs has made Norlha a coveted textile in fashion houses such as Hermès and Louis Vuitton. Along with the off-line stores, Norlha now starts to focus on selling online, directly to the customer, communicating the brand’s story as well as a lasting lifestyle in local communities.

The story of plastic bottle and used billboard cloth are surely not as appealing as that of the mysterious Tibetan luxury-like brand Norlha. P.E.T and Givingback highlight their theme on “sustainability”, and found their audience in business partners or public events. Yichang Bioriginal Organics also tries to tell their organic textile sanitary-pad supply chain among different platforms in the form of blog and image. Howbottle is active in promoting its idea and stories via different forms. The founder of Howbottle is often guested in relevant forums or podcasts. Howbottle’s

stories are more participatory, showing users' images or local communities. They create advocacy themed video while spread their brand influence. Images or videos for brands such as Zuczug and Kokolu, if not labeled as B Copration, have no difference with those of other fast fashion. "Stylishness", "beauty" are the priority in their narratives and images.

4.1.2 B Corp Labelling

For SFBCs that focused on online storytelling, B corp label surely will increase the trustworthiness of their behavior and products.

However, for brands that center on offline marketing or industrial buyer, in the case of P.E.T and Givingback, they do not use the labeling of B Corp in their products. For example, as to P.E.T, their customers are professional buyers, and may care more about the quality of their products, so their website show how the plastic transformation works, and provide relevant quality inspection certification such as GRS (Global Recycle Standard).

It is interesting that in a field-visit of Zuczug franchisee store, the author interviewed the sales people, and found that they had no idea of B Corp verification system, and their products had no B Corp labels. Whereas for the online store, the B Corp label is impressive in the introduction of their products.

4.1.3 New Trends

Through the qualitative study, new trends among SFBCs were identified. One of these trends is cobranding, where small SFBCs partner with others to promote their influence. These partners may include other SFBCs themselves, as seen with Howbottle's partnership with Norlha, or with other non-sustainable but willing-to-switch-to-sustainable businesses, such as Kokolu's cooperation with other pop-up stores. The second trend is the SFBCs' focus on targeting overseas markets. Given that their products may be perceived as expensive for budget-constrained domestic customers, some SFBCs are seeking to reach international buyers. To achieve this, Norlha, P.E.T, and Kokolu have all developed English websites to showcase their products and engage with foreign customers.

4.2 Customer Behavior

An analysis of the 56 responses collected from the purposive and snow-ball sampling survey shed some light on customer behavior, which can be summarized in the following aspects.

4.2.1 Awareness of Sustainable Fashion and B Corp

It can be found that compared with big brands such as Patagonia and Chloé all the new start-up SF brands such as Howbottle, P.E.T, Givingback and Kokolu still have low awareness among the respondents. It is interesting that although Yichang Bioriginal Organics is small, it is relatively known among respondents. This could be explained that their products, the sanitary pads, are affordable, and used more often than other products (see Figure 1).

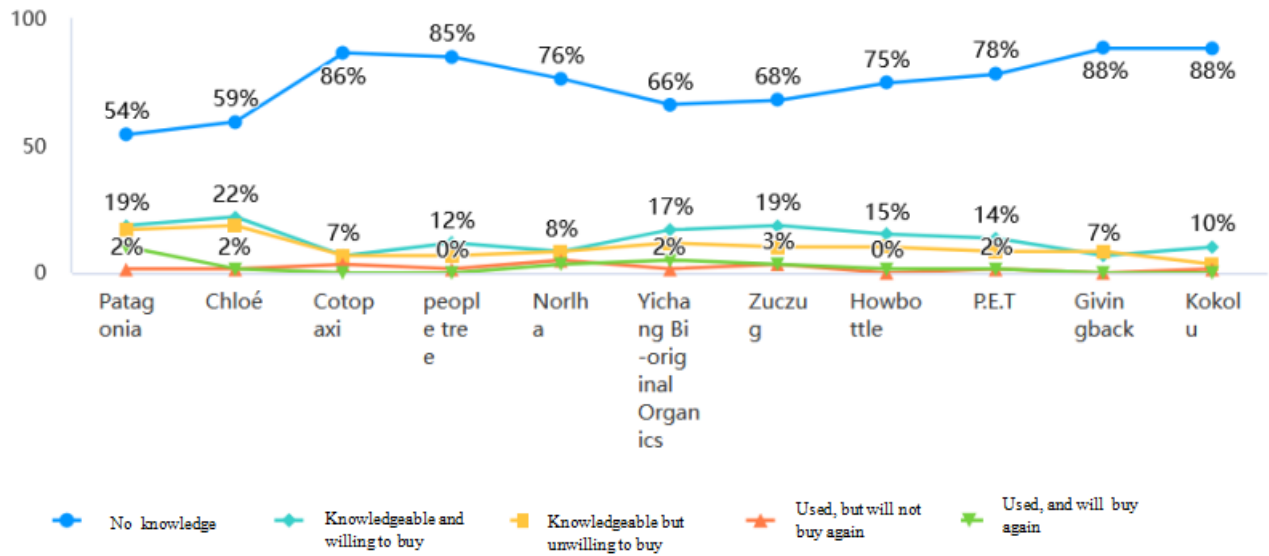


Figure 1: Knowledge about Sustainable Fashion Brands

4.2.2 Factors to Influence Purchasing Behavior

Based on the survey results, affordability emerged as the primary factor influencing the purchasing decisions of sustainable fashion products, followed by product appearance and style, functionality, brand reliability and trustworthiness, and lastly, social or environmental sustainability (see table 3).

Table 3: Factors Ranking in SF Products Purchasing

Factors	weighted score	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Fifth
Affordability	3.41	19 (37.25%)	12(23.53%)	11 (21.57%)	6 (11.76%)	3 (5.88%)
Appearance and stylishness	2.79	11 (20.75%)	12(22.64%)	7 (13.21%)	9 (16.98%)	14 (26.42%)
Functionality and durability	2.75	8 (16%)	9(18%)	17 (34%)	11 (22%)	5 (10%)
Brand trustworthiness and reliability	2.64	10 (19.61%)	10(19.61%)	6 (11.76%)	15 (29.41%)	10 (19.61%)
Sustainability for environment and society	2.61	8 (16.67%)	12(25%)	12 (25%)	6 (12.5%)	10 (20.83%)

The average weighted score for the ranking question is based on the order of the options selected by all respondents. It reflects the comprehensive ranking of the options, with a higher score indicating a higher overall ranking.

The calculation method is as follows: Average comprehensive score of the option = $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weight}) / \text{number of respondents who answered the question}$. It is noteworthy that social and environmental sustainability considerations were ranked as the least important factors. This finding highlights the need for sustainable fashion brands to prioritize affordability and product design in order to increase consumer appeal, while also emphasizing the importance of promoting the social and environmental benefits of sustainable fashion products to raise awareness and foster a more sustainable fashion industry.

4.2.3 Barriers to Purchase SF Products

Furthermore, for the barrier to purchase SF products, the answers demonstrate that access to information and purchase channel is placed as the primary challenge, followed by the limited budget (see Figure 2).

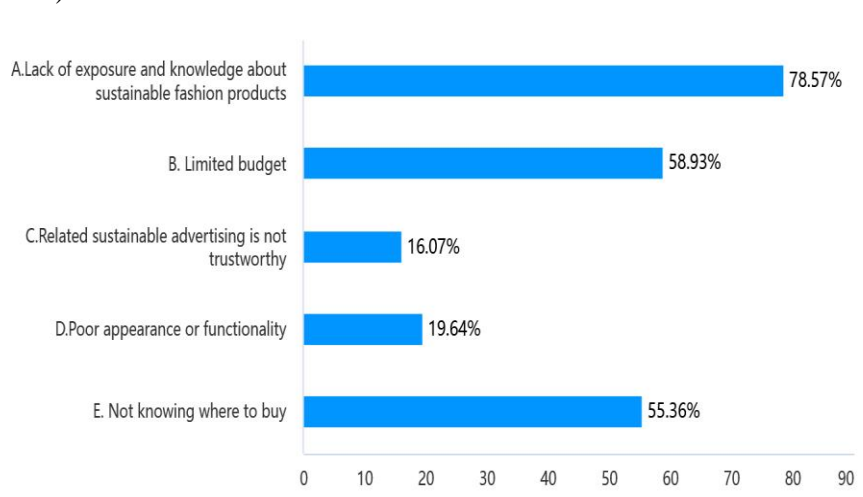


Figure 2: Barriers to Purchase SF Products

The survey results indicate that the internet, including websites and social media, is the primary means by which customers discover sustainable fashion products. Word of mouth and media reports are also significant sources of information, while brick-and-mortar retail channels are the least common.

In summary, the marketing strategies of SFBCs are primarily focused on two dimensions: 'sustainability' and 'fashion' from the supply side. However, from the demand side, customers prioritize 'affordability' and 'fashion' (referring to style and form) over 'sustainability.' This suggests a common ground of "fashion" between the supply and demand, but a mismatch in terms of "sustainability" and "affordability." The survey highlights that the awareness of sustainability has not been strongly cultivated among customers, and the SFBCs have neglected to emphasize affordability in their marketing strategies.

5. Suggestions

5.1 Customers Segments based on "sustainability" and "affordability"

To illustrate and address the mismatch between the supply and demand regarding the "sustainability" and "affordability", an instrument of analysis is recommended: the two-dimensional quadrant analysis tool of "sustainability" and "affordability" (see Figure 3).

The vertical axis represents sustainability consciousness, and the horizontal axis represents price affordability. Customers are divided into four quadrants as follows:

Segment 1: High Sustainability Conscious, High Price Affordability

Segment 2: High Sustainability Conscious, Low Price Affordability

Segment 3: Low Sustainability Conscious, High Price Affordability

Segment 4: Low Sustainability Conscious, Low Price Affordability

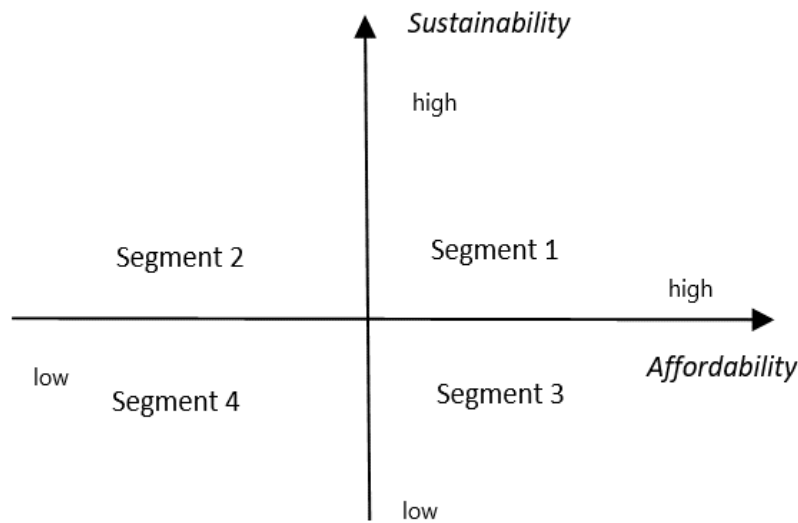


Figure 3: The two-dimensional quadrant analysis tool of “Sustainability” and “Affordability”

5.2 Marketing Suggestions for Different Customers Segments

SFBCs should target all four segments of customers, but they may use different marketing and communication strategies to reach each segment.

Segment 1: High Sustainability-Conscious, High Price Affordability. This group of customers is willing to pay a premium price for sustainable products that positively impact the environment and society. Therefore, SFBCs should emphasize the social and environmental benefits of their products, as well as the quality and unique design attributes to justify the high price point. This is the case of Norlha, which stresses their storytelling of sustainability while maintaining their products quality.

Segment 2: High Sustainability-Conscious, Low Price Affordability. This segment of customers may be financially constrained, but they are still interested in purchasing sustainable products. SFBC should offer more affordable options, such as small articles, second-hand items, upcycling, and recycled materials, to cater to their specific needs. Marketing to this segment can emphasize the affordability aspect and provide messaging that demonstrates that their budget-consciousness does not have to come at the expense of sustainability. A successful example of this approach is Yichang Bioriginal Organics. Instead of selling large items like jackets, they focus on selling small products like sanitary pads, which helps to reduce costs and make sustainable products more affordable to budget-conscious customers. Other companies, such as Howbottle, Givingback, and P.E.T, are committed to producing sustainable products made from low-cost recycled materials. Despite their affordable pricing, these companies face the challenge of reaching out to customers who prioritize sustainability. As indicated from the survey (see Figure2), there is a need for increased exposure and knowledge of SF goods among sustainability-conscious consumers. To overcome this challenge, these companies can leverage various marketing strategies, such as social media advertising, influencer collaborations, and partnerships with sustainable lifestyle brands. By doing so, they can raise awareness about their products and attract customers who are passionate about sustainability. Additionally, they can focus on building a strong brand image that resonates with the values of their target audience, emphasizing the affordability and sustainability of their products.

Segment 3: Low Sustainability-Conscious, High Price Affordability. This customer segment is willing to pay a premium price for products; however, their purchasing decisions are not driven by a recognition of "sustainability". Companies such as Zuczug and Kokolu cater to this customer segment by prioritizing style over sustainability, with their marketing strategy focusing on the

conspicuous value of their products. While these companies do mention sustainable practices in their online communication, SFBCs looking to cultivate sustainability consciousness should emphasize the high-quality and durability of their products instead. Highlighting details about sustainable manufacturing practices such as fair labor practices and waste reduction can also attract these customers. Hang tags and digital technologies, such as applications that disclose the origin of a product, can provide comprehensive and captivating information to educate consumers at the point of sale. Additionally, digital technologies can enhance transparency and traceability in the supply chain, ensuring that products are ethically produced and sustainable. By doing so, SFBCs may be able to transform low sustainability-conscious customers into customers who show more interest in sustainability.

Segment 4: Low Sustainability-Conscious, Low Price Affordability. This customer segment, much like those in segment 3, has low awareness of sustainable products, but price remains a primary consideration. To address this, education is needed to cultivate awareness of sustainable products. Working with influencers who have a following among this target market can also help to promote sustainable fashion products. In addition, SFBCs should offer sustainable items at an affordable price point as an alternative to less sustainable choices. Utilizing tools such as ecommerce product bundles, seasonal inventory clearances, and other creative pricing strategies can effectively cater to this specific audience.

5.3 The Mapping of SFBCs Positions in the Context of Affordability-Sustainability Segments

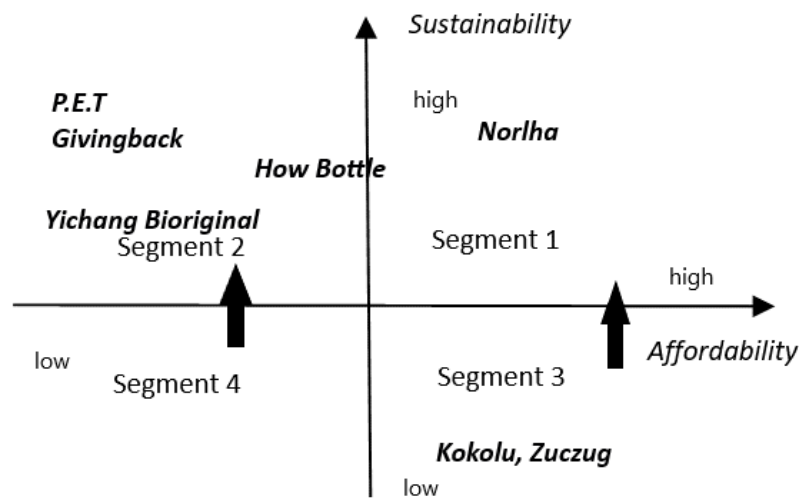


Figure 4: The mapping of SFBCs position in the context of “Sustainability” and “Affordability”

Based on the analysis of customer segments, it is possible to create a summarized mapping of the SFBCs that clearly illustrates the position of each brand and offers insights into their prospects (see Figure 4).

In summary, Norlha has succeeded in retaining customers in segment 1, while Kokolu and Zuczug have positioned themselves in segment 3. The other four SFBCs are positioned in segment 2. It is noteworthy that Howbottle is striving to differentiate their products and establish themselves as a middle-to-high affordability brand. The two arrows indicate that there is room for more effort to transform customers in segment 4 and 3 into segments 2 and 1, respectively. This effort is based on the assumption that customers' sustainability consciousness can be cultivated and reinforced, while affordability is not easily changed in the short-term. As customer awareness of SF products is low, as revealed in the customer survey, there is ample room for improvement in this direction.

6. Conclusion and Limitation

With the analysis above, this paper can draw following conclusions:

1) The size, history, and positioning of different SFBCs in this research result in different marketing strategies and targeting of customer segments. Small SFBCs tend to be more start-up oriented with limited product lines, lower prices, ad hoc distribution, and less diverse promotion. B Corp certification can help cultivate and enhance sustainability awareness among existing and potential customers of start-up SF companies. Co-branding or cooperation in marketing can also be beneficial for the growth of SFBCs.

2) The survey results show that customers prioritize affordability over sustainability, and there is low sustainability awareness among respondents. Therefore, SFBCs in the research should adjust their marketing position by enhancing both the “sustainability” and “fashion” approaches while considering affordability.

3) The Affordability-Sustainability Segments tool clarifies different positions of SFBCs and provides suggestions for future marketing direction. Efforts need to be made to cultivate sustainability awareness to attract more customers or transform existing low-sustainability-awareness customers.

Overall, the study of SFBCs in China sheds light on the marketing strategies of sustainable fashion brands and provides insights for future development.

The limitation of the research lies in two aspects. Firstly, the sampling methods, which included purposive and snowballing sampling, may have been effective in capturing reliable respondents for this explorative research of customer behavior, but some useful observations may have been missed due to the limited sampling. Secondly, while the discussion of SFBCs in this research emphasizes the marketing strategy of brands for customers in B2C businesses, some companies may prioritize industrial buyers (P.E.T and Givingback) in B2B businesses. Therefore, the study from the customers’ perspective in this research may not be entirely applicable, and further research is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable fashion brands marketing in this region.

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