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## Sustainability Issues and Solutions in the Production of a Columbia Brand Active Wear Tank Top

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Columbia

Athletic Tank Top

Katie Summers

RTL 6040: Sustainability in the Apparel and Retail Industry

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## **Introduction**

The garment discussed in the previous part of this research project was an athletic tank top. The item is made by the brand Columbia and is completely polyester according to its tags. Columbia is a brand known for its jackets as well as its other outdoor and athletic wear as the company shows to promote an active lifestyle with concern for the environment based on its website (“Columbia,” n.d.). Even so, the brand still seems to have some developing to do in regards to making its entire supply chain more eco-friendly and sustainable.

### **Most Important Sustainability Concern**

Based on research, the author has decided that the most important concern is actually the first step of the supply chain, raw materials creation. This decision was based on the fact that what happens at this first stage has an impact on the other steps within the supply chain. This is due to the reason that this garment, as discussed, is made from 100% polyester which has a reputation in the industry for being environmentally unfriendly. Even if steps are taken beyond in the other parts of the supply chain, the issue of polyester is still present.

Polyester is a synthetic fiber used in textiles that are made in to a variety of apparel products as it is cheaper than natural fibers and easier to procure due to the mass amounts being consistently produced (Wicker, 2021). It is durable which makes it useful athletic wear, hence, it was most likely used to make the discussed garment (Wicker, 2021). However, to make polyester, chemicals that come from fossil fuels are needed (Wicker, 2021). Polyesters are not biodegradable which means that they do not break down easily like other natural materials and can actually sit in landfills for 20 to 200 years (Gray, 2020).

In addition to this, a great deal of water is used in the creation of polyester as it is needed for cooling (Gray, 2020). The leftover water from the process is filled with dangerous chemical

dyes which can hurt people, animals, and the environment (Gray, 2020). The washing process of polyester also causes harm to the environment and the food chain as microplastics fall off of the garments, end up in water systems, and then are eaten by fish (Gray, 2020). Moreover, those involved with the creation process have been reported to be people in poor countries used as slaves in these unsafe factories (Hodakel, 2021).

The easiest way to deal with all of these problems caused by the creation of polyester would be to stop using it in garments, however, it is not that simple, unfortunately. There are some steps that an ethical and sustainable brand could take to move in the direction to become less dependent on this harmful material. First, there is the utilization of more recycled polyester which comes from recycled polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles (Wicker, 2021). Recycled polyester takes 35% less water in its creation process compared to regular polyester (Gray, 2020).

An advantage to using recycled polyester instead of regular polyester would be the fact that it would help with the issue of plastic bottles in landfills, as they are commonly used in making the recycled polyester (Gray, 2020). Another advantage would be to take away business from those facilities previously discussed that are said to use slave labor. Perhaps the creation of more facilities that produce the recycled polyester could create safe jobs for those people being exploited. A disadvantage with this solution is the fact that it does not technically solve the entire problem of polyester as recycled polyester still has downsides such as the fact that it can still give off microplastics when washed (Gray, 2020). Another disadvantage to this possible solution is that it could hurt the brand financially, as the cost of recycled polyester is higher than that of regular polyester since it is not made as consistently (Wicker, 2021).

To deal with the fact that recycled polyester is still polluting in regards to microplastics the brand could add washing bags to consumer purchases of garments made of the material (Gray, 2020). These washing bags help to not only keep microplastics out of water systems, but they can also keep synthetic garments from being damaged in the wash (“Washing bag,” n.d.). Supposedly, recycled polyester is becoming more and more popular meaning that the prices are projected to decrease as suppliers are pushed to make investments in the creation of this material (Arthur, 2017). This would be helpful for the brand when dealing with the financial impacts of using this material. However, a well-established brand like Columbia would most likely be able to handle the possible added costs as the company has a decent outlook for the 2021 fiscal year as net sales are projected to rise more than 21.5% (“Columbia Sportswear Company,” 2021).

Columbia discussed on its website the importance of the environment and the various steps the employees have taken to make the business more sustainable, including using less chemicals, water, and energy to make products (“Innovating products,” n.d.). This leads the researcher to believe that Columbia has an interest in keeping up with this image of being eco-conscious, however, the brand may not want to make this change due to the amount of money it would cost to switch from regular polyester to recycled. Plus, the brand may also be busy focusing on making advancements in its other initiatives. Overall, Columbia does show to have the capacity to be able to make this change.

### **Conclusion**

Polyester is popular in the industry, but harmful to both the people involved in making it and the environment. The harm starts at the very beginning of the supply chain with raw materials creation. Using recycled polyester is a decent alternative that can start to help with the pollution problem and Columbia should take the proper steps to do so. However, switching to

recycled polyester is still just a part of what this brand and many others need to do to make the industry a more sustainable one.

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