

Importance of Ethics and Sustainability in the Fashion Industry: An Abstract



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Abstract It is widely acknowledged that ethical consumption is increasing and ethical fashion is now in “high demand” (Bray et al. 2011; Domeisen 2006; Manchiraju and Sadachar 2014). However, it is also argued that, although consumers are able to form opinions based on ethical issues, their purchasing behaviour may not match their claimed intentions (Bray et al. 2011; Joergens 2006). This should therefore have a severe attenuating effect on the market penetration of ethical fashion, unless the purchasing decisions are really made because of other factors, which could be determined in a subsequent study, if appropriate. This apparent conflict is one of the driving forces for the current study. Whilst some researchers state that there is a growing awareness amongst consumers of ethical and sustainable issues, others claim that there is a lack of knowledge and a “disconnect” amongst consumers. If this lack of awareness were a more accurate reflection of the situation, it could explain the relatively small effect of ethics and sustainability on purchasing behaviour. Therefore, this study intends to investigate consumer attitudes, by the level of commitment shown by the sample of UK consumers, to pay a premium for ethical and sustainable fashion.

Young consumers are particularly influenced by trends and by the fashion press and media. As a result it is believed that they are the most enthusiastic of all consumer groups when purchasing fast fashion (Martin and Bush 2000; Morgan and Birtwistle 2009; Birtwistle and Moore 2007). This is supported by Mirza (2004) who states that the young are tomorrow’s decision-makers and influencers. However, other literature suggests that whilst the young consumer favours the idea of buying from an ethical source, in fact, their lack of “moral imagination” does not apply such principles in practice (Joy et al. 2012). This could lead to a disproportionately negative effect on the application of the ethical values to the acquisition of fashion items.

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If this were correct, it could be one possible explanation as to why the apparent appreciation of ethical issues is not born out in actual purchasing decisions. Naturally, ethical considerations are not only of relevance in the fashion market.

Whilst some researchers state that there is a growing awareness amongst consumers of ethical and sustainable issues (Parker 2011), others such as Payton (2013) claim that there is a lack of knowledge and a “disconnect” amongst consumers. If this lack of awareness were a more accurate reflection of the situation, it could explain the relatively small effect of ethics and sustainability on purchasing behaviour detected in surveys by Joergens (2006) and Shen et al. (2012). However, the low level of awareness means that the studies do not appear to give any significant indication as to the durability of the movement, or whether like so many other trends within this industry, it will disappear and will not be sustainable. Both Joergens (2006) and Shen et al. (2012) identified a potential willingness to pay extra for ethical and sustainable fashion, but neither could demonstrate a significant inclination to do so in practice. Both research groups concluded that an increase in knowledge of ethical and sustainable issues was essential to improve the chance of success of the movement. This study, which is work in progress, intends to investigate whether consumer attitudes in Britain have changed since the Joergens (2006) study and whether they differ from those more recently investigated in Hong Kong by Shen et al. (2012), by the level of commitment shown by the sample of UK consumers to pay a premium for ethical and sustainable fashion.

References Available Upon Request