ETHICAL FASHION AND ITS EFFECTS
ON CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR

by

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We live in a time where consumers are constantly bombarded by words such as ethical fashion, ecofashion, fair trade, organic, etc. With all of these different “green” words floating around it is hard for consumers to make informed decisions regarding sustainable purchases. Even companies such as Cotton Incorporated have stated that with the existence of so much “green marketing vocabulary”, it is nearly impossible for consumers to distinguish one product category from the rest and such difficulty leads them to stop looking (Thomas, 2008, p. 528). These new socially responsible products have become very in vogue at the moment but does this idea of ethical fashion really influence consumer buying decisions? In this study, I will be examining what specific requirements need to be met to consider a brand ethical and how much this type of branding affects consumer buying decisions.

When examining this area of ethical fashion it is first important to define some pertinent terms, or as Sue Thomas says in her article, create an “eco-lexicon” (2008). Some of the most important terms include the following:

**Eco-fashion**: a term related to the fashion, marketing, merchandising, and journalism fields. Within a broader context, the term most likely dates back to the early 1990s and refers to fashion and trends that leave little impact on the environment. In the fashion academic world, it refers specifically to the fabric and fiber content of a garment with little or no impact on the environment (Thomas, 2008). In the fashion industry, this is especially hard to achieve, since it not only describes the item, but also the whole supply chain. From supplier to manufacturers (economic fabric lay), retailers have to be especially careful to make sure all channels are ethically secure and that fair trade laws are being followed. The transport of the products has also to be considered, and ultimately so do the after purchase care and the ultimate disposal of the garment itself (Beard, 2008).
*Fair Trade*: This term relates to social justice and corporate responsibility. It mostly relates to developing countries and it ensures the workers have healthy working conditions and receive a fair living wage. In the fashion industry this relates to fibers used as well. Originally the term fair trade was just used to describe food products, such as coffee, and craftwork (Thomas, 2008).

*“Green”*: This term is typically used to describe something that has a positive impact on the environment. It is a term that can be used interchangeably with “eco” and it has become more popular in recent media. An example would be Vanity Fair’s “Green” Issue which began in May 2006 (Thomas, 2008).

*“Greenwash”*: This term is used sometimes in a negative manner to describe the cover-up of harmful environmental facts. It is often used as a marketing ploy by organizations allied with the environmental movement. It is also used to describe the misleading of consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company (sinsofgreenwashing.org, 2013). Underwriters Laboratories (2013) published a study which they called the seven sins of Greenwashing. These sins are: 1) The sin of the hidden trade-off, 2) The sin of no proof, 3) The sin of vagueness, 4) The sin of irrelevance, 5) The sin of lesser of two evils, 6) The sin of fibbing and, 7) The sin of worshipping false labels. These apply not only to products in the fashion industry, but also to other items such as cleaning products. These “sins” all deal with a lack of information or false claims (sinsofgreenwashing.org, 2013).

*“Environmental”*: This term is used more in an academic setting. It is also used to refer to certain manmade fibers due to their “laundering, longevity, and potential for recycling” (Thomas, 2008).
“Ethical”: This is a term often used to describe consumption, fashion design, manufacturing, and trading. The traditional use is often used in conjunction with morals and has a more philosophical meaning. In terms of fashion, it is used to describe a positive impact from various channels such as design, consumer choice, and production on the fashion industry. These ethical actions can benefit workers, consumers, or animals (such as humane treatment of animals for products produced from fur, leather, etc.). Ethical fashion and eco fashion are sometimes used interchangeably but ethical fashion is considered more politically correct (Thomas, 2008).

“Organic”: This term is often used interchangeably with the world “natural”. It relates directly to fibers and textiles but is often used incorrectly. Organic is a certification and it comes from the farming and food service industries. It often relates back to how the fibers, such as cotton, were grown and if chemicals were used.

“Recycled”: In the fashion industry, recycled refers to when clothes that are no longer used, are given a second life. They may be sold through secondhand or vintage shops. Other important terms include downcycling, upcycling, and redeploying. Upcycling describes when garments are actually increased in value through customization. Redeploying describes when clothes are modified, redyed, etc. and then sold back into the clothing system. Downcycling is when clothes are completely deconstructed and turned into rags or stuffing. This step is often overlooked when considering ethical fashion. How the garment is treated at the end of its life is just as important as how it was created.

Sustainability: Sustainability relates to environmentalism but is more involved. In Thomas’s fashion lexicon, she describes sustainability as something that benefits both present
and future generations (2008). It involves a change in the current fashion industry towards making more of a positive impact.

"Vintage and Secondhand": A recently growing market, vintage clothing is a recurring trend, especially among the younger generation. Secondhand was used to be looked down on as something bought only by lower income individuals, however, this genre of clothing has enjoyed a recent revival. In an ethical fashion article by Beard (2008), he describes a reason for this new trend as consumers’ ever-growing desire to find something unique or exclusive. Clothes that had previously been dubbed “secondhand” have now been transformed or rebranded into the new more luxurious term of “vintage”. It has turned into a sort of connoisseurship to be able to identify true vintage items from the fakes and to own one of a kind vintage piece from a famed designer. This modern idea of vintage has seen drastic changes throughout history. For example, during the bubonic plague, selling the clothing of the deceased actually became a business before they became aware that this was contributing to the spread of the deadly disease. This type of apparel then changed into low income status clothing, as mentioned earlier, and now it has come back into style.

Another important idea or theme that is necessary to examine is the idea of “fast fashion” vs. “slow fashion”. Fast Fashion is a term used to describe fashion retailers who bring trends from the catwalk to stores as quickly as possible. These companies have a high clothing turnover rate and the goal is to bring customers trendy clothing quickly and cheaply. In the article mentioned earlier, Beard describes how consumers are becoming increasingly used to high availability of “trend-led fashionable clothing that is extremely cheap” and therefore there is “relatively little guilt felt about its disposability” (2008, p. 450). Some examples of fast fashion brands are Zara, H&M, Forever 21, Primark, and Topshop. Beard brings up an important point in
his paper that because this clothing is so cheap, consumers feel little guilt in disposing of it quickly. This high disposability rate brings down the ethical value of the brand because the end use of the garments is just as important as the manufacturing of the garments in the supply chain. This is one of the reasons why ethical branding is especially tough in the fashion industry. All links in the supply chain have to be accounted for, from the labor necessary to make the garment, to transport of the items, to ultimate aftercare and disposal (Beard, 2008). Slow fashion, in contrast, is in complete opposition of fast fashion techniques. It is more than just creating a perhaps eco-friendly product. Hazel Clark, research chair of Parsons School of Design, commented that slow fashion is all about “the consumer becoming aware of the whole process—from design through production through use and through the potential to reuse (Mau & Phelan, 2012). This movement focuses not only on the consumption of the product, but in fact the whole cycle.

Between the high disposability of the clothing and trying to keep labor costs low, many companies have encountered problems in the form of lawsuits for violating ethical standards. One reason for these lawsuits, especially in fast fashion brands, is the violation of Intellectual Property laws for creating knock-offs of designer brands such as Diane Von Furstenberg, Anna Sui, and Gwen Stefani; one example being in the lawsuits filed against Forever 21 by many of these brands. Most of these lawsuits resulted in settlements by Forever 21 (Entine, 2012). These companies face the moral dilemma of creating trendy clothing without copying exact designs. Another avenue where companies tend to cut costs is labor and manufacturing. One example is the scandal regarding Fairtrade International (FLO) when one of the projects they were overseeing for Limited Brands was found to be paying sub-par wages and using child labor to make their products (Entine, 2012). This caused a great uproar since Fairtrade International is
known as being one of the largest labelers of ethical goods. Another example that brought to light poor working conditions was the fire in an apparel factory in Pakistan in 2012 that killed 264 workers, including a 10 year old boy (Ellis, 2012). This was one of the worst industrial accidents, on par with the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911. With these examples of unethical fashion, it is relevant to ask, “what is being done to stop these situations from happening?”

As mentioned earlier, Fairtrade International (FLO) is one of the largest labeler of ethical goods but they are not the only organization designed to regulate fair trade; in fact many countries have their own branch. Some examples include Fair Trade USA, Ethical Trading Initiative UK, Solidaridad and the Clean Clothes Campaign in the Netherlands, and Fair Wear in Australia. Although all these individual organizations exist, there is no “single organization or governmental body to regulate any specific ‘code of conduct’ for the fashion industry” (Beard, 2008). Much of the investigation and police work is left up to the individual consumer. There are stamps and labels that can be applied for, such as through ethicalbrand.com, but with each organization arguing for their own guidelines, what will stop the label from just becoming a corporate stamp (Entine, 2012). There exists a level of confusion, as mentioned earlier, regarding the terminology of the fashion industry as well. The debates regarding ethical standards become confused because there are varying definitions for each term. The idea of ethical fashion is in place but there are few to no guidelines on helping companies to maintain this high standard.

While discussing ethical fashion, it is important to question, do consumers actually care about ethically sound goods? Does ethical branding and marketing really affect consumer purchasing behavior? Through my research, I have found that this is a very niche market. Only a
small group of consumers are actively seeking out eco-friendly goods. In a poll conducted in September 2012, Glamour magazine created an informal questionnaire asking their readers if they actively seek sustainable clothing. Twenty four percent responded, “Yes. I’m always looking for fair-labor, free-trade stuff” while seventy-six percent responded, “Not really. It’s more like a happy accident if I find it”. This seems to be the trend in consumer attitudes.
Consumers seem to support the idea of sustainable goods yet are not investing the time in actively seeking out these items. This may be because this type of purchasing requires a higher time and monetary commitment from the consumer. Since there are no guidelines regulating the “code of conduct” of the fashion industry, consumers have to be proactive in label checking and also checking into the company they are purchasing from. If they do not do this, then they can become victims of “greenwashing” or false advertising claims made by businesses. Also as I mentioned, a higher monetary value is usually placed on these “green” goods. More money has to be invested by the company to make sure all channels in the supply chain are ethically sound and therefore customers have to pay a higher price. This idea is in direct opposition with the common ideology of “fast fashion” which has become very popular with high street retailers today.

Consequently, the purpose of this study is twofold. The first is to examine specific requirements that ethical brands need to meet. This information is useful for both consumers who want more information about ethical fashion in order to help them make more informed choices and also to businesses who perhaps want to market themselves better as an ethically sound company. The second purpose as stated earlier is to see if branding products as ethical really affects consuming buying choices. Companies can better represent themselves as being socially responsible by taking into account all aspects that go into making their product. In the fashion
industry, again, this is labor costs, manufacturing, materials used, transportation, retail, and overall aftercare and end disposal of the garments or items. This goes into corporate responsibility. Also it is important to connect with consumer values and make sure the company is honest to their market. I think the initiative that needs to happen to push ethical fashion into popular society is to create some sort of guidelines holding the fashion industry responsible. These need to be on an international level since many companies do outsource a lot of their production to other companies overseas. This is a large scale project but it needs to be done to ensure a level of honesty and the best products possible. Although the fashion industry does not necessarily directly affect one’s health, as is the case with the food and drug industries, the same level of guidelines needs to be put in place.

In conclusion, the area of ethical fashion is one of confusion at this time. There is so much “green” vocabulary that it is hard for consumers to make informed purchases and it is hard for companies to market themselves correctly. There is no one organization or ruling body that controls this area and therefore brands are left to hold themselves to their own standards. This area of ethical fashion is a niche market since most customers are not actively seeking out these products but it does seem to be a growing movement. People are becoming more concerned with the environmental impact of the items they are purchasing and also with the values of the companies they are buying from. There needs to be more organization but this market segment seems to be one to watch in future years as a growing trend. Hopefully we will all learn to take a little more time and money to make sure we are making an ethically secure choice.
Bibliography


