



CURRENT RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim is to contribute to a better understanding of ethical fashion consumption. Even though consumers demand more ethical responsibility from companies, it is debatable if consumers would sacrifice their own personal needs to support ethically produced clothing.

Design/methodology/approach – Focus groups are conducted in the UK and Germany in order to elicit consumers' beliefs and attitudes towards ethical issues in the fashion industry and its effect on purchase behaviour. Questionnaires are administered to verify the outcome of the focus groups.

Findings – The findings from this research demonstrate little evidence that ethical issues have any effect on consumers' fashion purchase behaviour. When it comes to fashion purchase, personal needs motivate consumers primarily to buy garments and take precedence over ethical issues.

Research limitations/implications – Only a specific age group between 18 and 26-years-old is interviewed. Both research methods are undertaken in the area of Manchester, England, and the area of Frankfurt, Germany, which perhaps limits the meaning of the results.

Practical implications – Consumers feel that they are often unable to make an ethical choice. Therefore they do seem to need more information to allow them to make better ethical judgements and there is a role for ethical fashion companies to communicate this more effectively.

Originality/value – This research paper gives insight into ethical fashion purchasing behaviour among UK and German consumers and provides information to improve the potential of ethical fashion.

Keywords Ethics, Fashion industry, Buying behaviour, Customer satisfaction, Germany, United Kingdom

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The ethical consumer market is going through a significant period of growth. Also in the fashion industry a change is taking place. New ethical fashion brands, such as American Apparel and People Tree, are trying to bring a fresh approach to the market and to gain interest from the ordinary fashion consumer. Their recent success and business growth in the fashion market raises the question whether or not ethical consumerism is "back in fashion" and if the alteration to a new consciousness really hits the fashion nerve of mainstream consumers of our times. It is debatable whether the majority of consumers would truly forgo their self-interest in order to purchase alternatives produced under ethically acceptable conditions.

Surveys have produced evidence that consumers will reward businesses that treat their workers and the environment fairly and sanction those that do not (Creyer and Ross, 1997; Forte and Lamont, 1998). However, limited research has been conducted concerning the consumers' view on ethical issues in the fashion industry and its influence on their purchase behaviour (Dickson, 1999, 2000; Balzer, 2000). Since ethical concerns exist globally, this study has the aim to analyse the effect of ethical issues on



consumers' fashion purchasing behaviour in the UK and Germany. In order to fulfil the aim, the research objectives are:

- to define ethical fashion;
- to analyse the awareness of ethical issues in fashion of consumers and its effect on the purchase of fashion products;
- to compare ethical attitudes towards the fashion industry in both England and Germany; and
- to examine consumers' attitudes towards ethical fashion.

Defining ethical fashion

Ethical fashion is not only hard to define, as there is no one industry standard. Moreover, it often has common characteristics with other movements such as fair trade and ecology or green fashion. The term ethical fashion is a new approach of "fashion with conscience" in the market and refers to a growing number of ethical clothing companies such as American Apparel, Edun, or Gossypium that strive to attract young mainstream consumers by producing fashionable clothes. The principle is to source garments ethically while providing good working standards and conditions to workers and to provide a sustainable business model in the clothes' country of origin. Furthermore, organic material is used to minimally impact the environment (Mirza, 2004; Laub, 2005). Consequently, ethical fashion can be defined as fashionable clothes that incorporate fair trade principles with sweatshop-free labour conditions while not harming the environment or workers by using biodegradable and organic cotton.

Research methodologies

Primary research has been undertaken to fulfil the requirements of the aim and objectives. A triangulation of different research approaches is chosen to increase the validity and credibility of the research findings. Focus groups as a qualitative method and questionnaires as a quantitative method are used.

Focus group and questionnaire

Given the limited insights provided by literature into ethical consumerism in fashion, focus groups are deemed an effective means of exploratory data collection, as relatively little is known about the phenomenon of interest (Calvin and Lewis, 2005). Furthermore, focus groups represent a time-efficient way of obtaining a rich vein of information and are therefore suited to the research of this present work.

Group discussions were recorded with the participants' permission and a discussion guide was used to encourage topics to be explored. The questions used in the focus group were developed in accordance with established guidelines (Krueger, 1998) and pre-tested with a small group of people. The questions were basically aimed to gain insight into the following five topics of research:

- (1) awareness and concerns about ethical issues in the fashion industry;
- (2) resulting behaviour;
- (3) beliefs about ethical fashion;
- (4) effect on purchase decisions; and
- (5) attitudes towards possible solutions.

Despite the fact that a discussion guide existed, both focus group sessions were relatively unstructured to allow and encourage participants to raise any aspect of the topic considered as important. Nevertheless, it was ensured that all topics of importance were addressed.

To increase reliability and validity of focus groups, it is argued (Calvin and Lewis, 2005) that statistical research is still of paramount importance when doing research. Following the completion of the focus group interviews a questionnaire was administrated based on the outcome of the focus group findings to verify at an individual level the various issues discussed. The questionnaire was pre-tested and recommendations and improvements were taken into account before sending out the questionnaire to the final sample.

Sample

Focus groups were conducted in Frankfurt, Germany, and in Manchester, England. The respondents of the focus group were all students aged between 21 and 25 years in Germany and between 22 and 26 years in England. In the questionnaire the respondents were aged between 20 and 26 years in Germany and between 18 and 26 years in England. The sample was chosen, on the one hand, because young consumers will be the next generation of ethical consumers (Mirza, 2004) and on the other hand, this consumer group shows more interest in fashion than older consumers. They are also a group who could really make a difference by forcing retailers and brands to take action.

The group discussions involved five people in Germany and four in England. Although the most widely recommended size for group discussions is between 8 and 14 (Morgan, 1997), if the subject matter is sensitive using fewer respondents is advised.

For the questionnaire a convenient sample was chosen. The questionnaires were sent out via e-mail because respondents are anonymous which is a benefit conducting research about ethics. Around 100 questionnaires were sent out in Germany as well as in England. In Germany 64 and in England 53 completed questionnaires were sent back.

Results

Results of focus groups

The qualitative data is analysed in a descriptive way in relation to the issues raised. The identified issues of the focus group will be described and discussed in turn.

Findings of German focus group

Awareness of ethical issues in the fashion industry. The focus group discussion revealed that even though participants are aware of ethical issue in the fashion industry and they know about the working conditions in developing countries, they are not really concerned about them when they go shopping. They stated:

BF: I am aware of the issues that workers in developing countries might work under bad working conditions. However, when I go shopping, I decide between countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and China. And I have no clue what kind of difference this makes. I as the consumer don't have the choice since almost everything is produced in Asia. I cannot buy a product which doesn't include any ethical issues. Even though, I do check the "Made in" sign sometimes, it still doesn't tell me anything about how ethically it was produced.

DR: When I go shopping I don't think about under which conditions it was produced. But I buy it because I simply like it. For buying fashionable clothes, the price must be reasonable and this foregoes ethical issues.

Environmental issues caused by clothing production are even less of interest. They are only concerned about what feels good on their skin and not what is unhealthy for the environment. As the group discussion progressed it was pointed out that it is difficult to agree on an overall description what ethical behaviour actually is and when unethical conduct starts. For some, child labour is the worst ethical issue. Others had the opinion that it is sometimes better for the child to have a job and work the whole day rather than living on the street in the slums. Underpaid jobs are justified by the fact that it is the local condition. One stated:

GM: Poor wages is the last thing I perceive as unethical. We have a free market. You can also see it this way: at least they have a job.

All this suggests that issues of workers in developing countries and companies' behaviour are not perceived as so unethical. Economically, companies provide jobs and common welfare which participants see as socially responsible behaviour. The participants concern towards workers in the developing countries is smaller than the concern they see for themselves, like lower prices and comfortable materials to wear.

Difficulties. The reason for the participants' poor awareness of these issues is because they have had little media coverage. Furthermore, nobody could name either a fashion company with poor social responsibility or one with good social responsibility. One stated:

IW: Everybody knows that many garments are not produced under such fair conditions. My ignorance or insensitivity is probably a result of low media awareness. Therefore, I am unconcerned about that issue when I go shopping. The image and brand name influence me to buy the product more than the ethical awareness or social responsibility of the company.

Participants revealed that they have the same attitude towards cheap fast-fashion brands and exclusive brands and they perceive no difference in their ethical behaviour. Even though they would like to buy German products in order to support the German economy and that they can be surer about sweatshop-free products, they feel like they do not have any sound alternatives:

GM: Today, almost everything is produced in developing countries. That is exactly the reason why it doesn't influence me anymore. I don't have any other possibilities. Furthermore, I cannot differentiate between fashion brands anymore because I don't have enough information about it.

Participants' actions

Participants have never studied the social corporate responsibility of the brand they favour. Moreover, the majority of the participants doubted that the information provided on a company's web sites is truly honest. A company's membership in, for example, the Ethical Trading Initiative is treated with scepticism:

BF: Every company is particularly concerned about their image. They think about changing something when they realise that they are losing profits. In order that nobody finds out or gets influenced by negative news, companies become a member of ethical organisations.

Those companies are more concerned about this information becoming public than that they really want to change something.

Since participants do not feel well informed about fashion brands' ethical behaviour, they have not boycotted a fashion brand. However, the majority do think that bad publicity of brands would influence their buying decisions. Even though a boycott is seen as something positive to demonstrate that consumers do not support the business practices of certain companies, it is difficult to distinguish between brands and which they should avoid and which not. One stated:

DR: But where should I start? Gap is like H&M; there is no big difference. Where I am supposed to buy my clothes then? If I start to boycott Gap, I will buy more products from H&M, which is probably no better. I boycott the brand which is under media pressure, but the conclusion is that nothing improves just because I boycott one brand. At the end it is just a shifting of buying from another unethically acting company.

Attitudes towards ethical fashion. Asking the participants if they would be interested in buying ethically made clothing, they first showed little interest. When showing them ethical clothing in catalogues from Greenfibres and Hess Natur, all of the participants stated that they did not perceive the garments illustrated as stylish or fashionable. When presented with catalogues from ethical fashion brands including American Apparel, People Tree, Edun and Beyond Skin, all participants were positively surprised. One stated:

GM: American Apparel puts the attention on the product and I wouldn't think that is an ethical fashion brand because their message is different. That is why it catches my attention. We buy the image of the product and not because it was produced under ethical and fair conditions. I want to look good and make an impression on people.

Participants also complained about the availability of such fashion brands. The fact that the majority of these brands are only available via mail order catalogues made ethical fashion brands even less attractive.

Effect of ethical issues on purchasing clothing. The focus group discussion revealed that ethical issues take a backseat in purchasing clothing. Clothes have to fit their wardrobe needs and personal style. Moreover, price is the most decisive factor. They would rather forego ethical issues in order to buy more items than one or two ethically produced items:

DR: The price plays a major roll here. When I would have to choose between a shirt produced sweatshop-free by American Apparel for €20 and a shirt produced in China by H&M for €4, I would buy the cheaper one, for sure. Because next season, I would like to wear something new.

Some participants are in conflict about whether unethical business behaviour would really influence their clothes shopping behaviour. Purchasing clothing is more complicated than purchasing fairly traded coffee. Coffee just has to taste good but not all clothing looks the same and fits to your personal style. Participants stated that Body Shop's ethical business practice was the reason to buy products there. However, they admit that this was not the only reason why they actually buy there, but also because they like the products. One stated:

IW: But of course, in combination with that, I really like the products. They smell good, they offer a variety of products that suit to my skin type and the price is reasonable.

However, all participants admitted that they would buy a garment made by an unethically acting company, because they like the style and want to have the product. Furthermore, Fair Trade grocery products and organic food has more priority, mainly because food directly affects health, but unethical clothing does not harm one personally. It is suggested that participants show more ethical commitment when it has a positive influence on their own health rather than to others involved in the supply chain. Raising the question whether more awareness would influence their purchasing decisions by using a label indicating that is was produced ethically, one participant declared:

DR: Probably the message must be more obvious like one label saying “ethically produced” and the other one “produced by child labour”. Then I would buy the ethically produced product. But when I go shopping, I don’t have this kind of information and I will buy the product I like the most.

However, participants think that it is also the duty of the consumer to ask companies for more social responsibility and to act ethically. One stated:

DR: If the demand is not in the market, no company would change something to decrease their competitiveness by having to produce for the double the price.

Nevertheless, all of them answered that they would not be willing to pay more money for ethical conduct even though they could financially afford it.

Potential of ethical fashion. The potential for ethical fashion is seen with little scepticism. They would not mind that their clothes were produced ethically, but in the end, it all depends on style and price:

IW: Even though there has been an increasing potential for Fair Trade products in the food industry, I cannot compare this potential to the clothing industry, since we eat food but just wear clothes. As long as clothing won’t have any major disadvantage for me and is not unhealthy, I won’t be as interested in that as in food. I have to like the product, and the company’s reputation or ethical conduct is secondary.

GM: In my opinion, ethical fashion has potential in the clothing market when their style is cool, which suits today’s fashion style. If the message of the product is only that it was produced ethically, I won’t buy it. I pay a premium price because I like the product. When it is produced ethically, that is even better.

Findings of UK focus group

Awareness of ethical issues in the fashion industry. The focus group revealed that participants are aware of ethical issues in the fashion industry. However, it does not influence much their buying decisions. The biggest issue they perceive towards the fashion industry nowadays is the huge offer of disposable fashion and wearing fur. They stated:

DT: I am more worried about people buying hundreds/thousands/millions of pieces of clothes every year when they don’t need it. But, I do it as well.

NJ: The ethical issues in the fashion industry do bother me but it’s more the people wearing fur than factory conditions that I’m worried about. I know that is not very rational but the factory conditions don’t affect me as much.

Participants seem to have no knowledge about environmental issues or health damages to workers during the production process. More important is that the garment feels good, it is washable and it keeps its form. However, participants state that they look for the “Made in” sign and think about the consequences even though it does not influence them in the end:

CD: Even though I look at the “Made in” sign, it would never influence my purchasing decision. I still buy Nike shoes even though I know that Nike has some unethical conduct. When I love the shoes and they are for a reasonable price, I still buy them.

As the focus group discussion progressed participants stated that it is difficult to define unethical corporate behaviour and it is difficult to judge about these issues:

NB: I think it really depends on the actual country itself. Would you rather see a child begging on the street than working in a safe factory? It is a very tricky question and depends on the local conditions and culture. You cannot compare it to the UK. You actually have to define ethics and what is acceptable in that country.

DT: In certain countries it is better to have a bad job than having no job. I am not saying that I agree with low wages being paid but is it really doing any harm to keep those people in a job.

Participants think that Western companies provide jobs for workers in developing countries and it seems reasonable that Western companies adjust to local conditions.

Difficulties. The group discussion revealed that being aware of these issues does not mean that it will influence the consumer. The main problem is not that they have no knowledge or that it is not a topic in the media but the difficulty of what to do with it:

CD: When I heard the news about Gap and Nike in the media, I thought that everything that I am wearing is probably made under the same conditions. I don’t think it makes a difference if I boycott Nike or Gap. Doing so I would just be following what the media says. I should seriously think about everything that I am wearing to be a completely a good person.

This suggests that participants feel that they do not have any sound alternative. Even though they are aware of these issues, they do not transform the information they have into ethical action and still choose the products they like the most. One of the main difficulties they perceive is the limited offer of ethical products as well as the price of these. One participant stated:

NJ: There isn’t an alternative. There is People Tree, but they don’t sell clothes that I would want to buy for myself. It is not like going in Tesco and buying coffee or Fair Trade coffee. It is like fashion or some boring organic stuff.

The majority of the group stated that having information about the topic does not provide the opportunity to make the right choice. Even the price of the garment or the brand name cannot tell you under which conditions it was produced:

NB: More expensive clothes do not necessarily mean that it was produced under better or more ethical conditions. But when you buy a shirt for £3, you have to ask yourself: how can it be so cheap and how is this produced ethically. But on the other hand, you cannot say that something was produced ethically just because you are paying £30 for it.

It seems to be a particular problem for the participants that buying ethically is still not easy for the consumers nowadays. One stated:

CD: If I can avoid buying unethically produced products that wouldn't change my every day life than I will. I know that is really selfish but that's like life is. To become more active I have to pay a premium price. And I don't want and cannot afford this!

Participants' actions

Participants never became active to inform themselves about the company's social responsibility of the brand they favour. The majority also think that it would not make any difference to them if a company would provide this information on the company's web site:

CD: It is difficult to inform yourself about the social responsibility or working conditions of a company by, for example, visiting their web site. A company like Topshop has their factories all over the world and probably different working conditions related to the local standard. In some countries they produce more ethically than in others. But it does not make them an ethical brand.

Participants think that it is really difficult to act entirely ethically and boycotting one brand will not make a difference:

NB: If I start boycotting one company then I have to boycott every company on the high street but what am I going to wear then?

The discussion showed that people have different opinions about whether unethical behaviour is a reason to boycott or not. They argue that the effect of boycotts would not be ethically correct either:

NB: You are putting a lot of people out of business. What you are doing is surely even more unethical, than doing nothing.

On the other hand, they think that the only vote they have is putting pressure on companies acting unethically. Although participants could name quite a few ethical acting companies, so far they have only bought products from one of them, which was Body Shop. However, they all admitted that this was not the only reason why they bought their products there:

NJ: ...it is basically nice stuff. But when I buy products from Body Shop I like to think that it wasn't tested on animals.

This suggests that animal issues are more important to participants than human issues. Even though they buy products from Body Shop because of the good products, they stated it is a benefit for them if they know it was produced without any harm to animals.

Attitudes towards ethical fashion. All participants would prefer that their clothing was produced ethically. So far ethical fashion is only for a particular target group. Showing them catalogues from Greenfibres and Hess Natur, they all agreed that this is the picture they have about ethical fashion. One stated:

CD: Ethical fashion so far is quite limited. It depends on what is most important to you: to look smart and fashionable or to buy ethically made garments for a higher price.

Ethical fashion designed by Edun and American Apparel appealed much more to them and they think that these brands are more compatible to high street fashion. However, although they like the style much better, they would not be willing to pay these prices:

NJ: I know Edun because they sell it at Selfridges and I really like their stuff. However, I would never pay £50 for a shirt or £250 for a pair of jeans. Even American Apparel offers nice stuff . . . £15 for a shirt like this; I can find it cheaper somewhere else. Another problem is: where can I buy this stuff?

The availability of these new ethical fashion brands seems to be a crucial factor for buying them. Searching for it or having to order a catalogue first is too inconvenient for them.

Effect of ethical issues on purchasing clothing. The focus group discussion revealed that ethical issues have no influence on participants purchasing behaviour on clothing. So far they have not stopped buying a fashion product because of ethical or environmental reasons. The most important factors that influence their buying decisions are style and that they like the product and this supersedes ethical issues:

NB: If I like something I buy it, no matter really whether it is ethical or not. If it suits me, it fits well and I feel comfortable in it, then I buy it no matter where and how it was produced.

In this focus group it is debatable whether the media would influence their sensitivity about ethical issues towards their clothing buying behaviour. A bigger influence in their buying decision would be a label on the garment certifying that it was produced ethically. This suggests that consumers need to see the benefit that it was produced ethically, otherwise they will not reward companies who act ethically. On the other hand, some argued that they do not believe that a bigger media presence would make them buy more expensive products. In their opinion it is the responsibility of the companies to produce ethically but to maintain prices because they would not be willing to pay more. However, the majority thinks that consumers and the government also have to take over responsibility in forcing companies to act more ethically:

NB: I want fast fashion for a low price, so the industry delivers what I want. I can make a vote with my purchase. But also the government has to force companies to act more ethically.

Potential of ethical fashion. Participants stated that they see a potential in ethical clothing if it is fashionable and at a comparable price. Although they do not see it at the moment, they see more potential in the future:

CD: I like the idea of buying fair trade clothes in the future. Maybe when it stops bothering me what I look like. At the moment there is no offer for my target group.

DT: I do believe that ethical fashion has a future and I would change my buying behaviour if there would be an offer that suits my needs.

NB: People want to be good in their life. But the price plays a major role. People must be able to buy ethically produced garments to a comparable price.

Results of questionnaires

The results of the questionnaires are not presented in detail. Anyway, no major differences between the outcome of the focus group discussions and the questionnaire results of both individual countries were found. Consequently, the outcomes of the focus group discussions were mainly verified by the results of the questionnaire. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the questionnaire participants seem to be not as straightforward concerning the effect of ethical issues on their purchasing behaviour. This issue is discussed furthermore in the following section.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to contribute to a better understanding of ethical fashion consumption, which is a contemporary phenomenon in western societies. However, the findings from this research demonstrate little evidence that ethical issues have any effect on consumers' fashion purchase behaviour. When it comes to fashion purchase, the majority of consumers are more interested in their own personal fashion needs than the needs of others involved in the apparel supply chain.

Even though respondents are aware about ethical problems, it seems likely that their knowledge does not significantly affect their purchase decisions. The reasons for this behaviour are firstly that they feel that they do not have a real choice since large quantities of their garments are produced in developing countries. Furthermore, the "Made in" sign is no meaningful indicator of the production conditions. Secondly, they do not feel they are in a position to judge about unethical behaviour of manufacturing companies in developing countries. They argued that Western norms cannot be imposed on the culture of the manufacturing country.

This does not mean that consumers do not care at all about unethical behaviour, but it seems not all unethically behaviours affect purchasing behaviour in the same way, especially when it comes to fashion items. Among the respondents it seems that animal abuse creates more sympathetic support than unethical work practices in the apparel industry. As long as the chemicals in their clothes have no negative effect on their skin, they do not care about the effect on the health of the workers and the environment. It is also argued that consumers buy fair trade and organic food because it directly affects their health. Consequently, it is assumed that consumers only care about certain kind of ethical issues and in particular to the ones which influence the consumer directly.

The results of this research indicate the interest in a company's ethical conduct seems to be limited. Even negative news about apparel brands, such as Nike or Gap, has not stopped UK participants to continue buying their products because they simply liked them. Although the majority stated that they have negative attitudes towards the apparel industry, this information or awareness is not close to their mind when they go shopping.

It seems that the effect of ethical issues on consumers purchasing behaviour is relatively low because respondents cannot avoid acting unethically when purchasing clothing which refers to low or no availability of fashion that suits their aesthetic needs. Ethical fashion can be bought mainly from catalogues but for the charge of higher prices. Furthermore, respondents need more knowledge to be able to act more ethically. They look with cynicism at the brands, which probably all produce under the same conditions. Providing more information, as suggested by Dickson (1999), Mohr and Webb (2001) and Shaw and Tomolillo (2004), seems to be important for consumers to make a more ethical judgement. However, the focus group has also revealed that respondents can be distrustful of this sort of information. A helpful device would be a label containing ethical information in a condensed format and issued by a truthful and reliable source (Shaw and Tomolillo, 2004). Although the majority of the respondents would favour such a label, it is debatable if the implementation of such a label is really that effective, particularly when a minimal number of consumers read a label when they are looking for clothing.

Nevertheless, the majority of respondents showed favourable attitudes to buy ethical fashion and see a potential in this approach as long as it is comparable in

fashion and price to other fashion brands. As indicted by Henley (cited by WGSN, 2005), if consumers buy ethically, the ethical reason is not the priority of consumers needs or desires. The strongest predictor of purchasing is the appeal of the clothing itself rather than the social component (Dickson and Littrell, 1996; Kim *et al.*, 1999; Shaw and Tomillo, 2004).

Similar to other studies (Balzer, 2000; Shaw and Tomolillo, 2004; Dickson, 2005), the outcome of this research revealed that some respondents view ethics to be the responsibility of the corporate sector and government. Nevertheless, the majority of this research thinks that consumers have to take over responsibility as well and have to force companies to act more ethically.

Although Muncy and Vitell (1992) and Kotler (2003) argue that consumer behaviour is determined by culture and their specific ethical beliefs, comparing UK and German consumers no difference in consumers' behaviour with regard to ethical issues in clothing could be found. Even though British consumers seem to be more concerned and knowledgeable about issues in the apparel industry, which is a result of more media attention on companies such as Mark & Spencer and Gap, it does not translate it into more ethical actions.

It appears that there has been a great deal of openness and honesty in the qualitative study of this research and there is no attitude-behaviour gap as identified by Cone and Roper (cited by Simon, 1995) and Folkes and Kamins (1999). The quantitative research seems to be not as straightforward concerning the effect of ethical issues on their purchasing behaviour. The discrepancies that exist between the focus group and questionnaire results may be explained by the fact that the group dynamics in the groups provided a supportive and spontaneous atmosphere, whereas the solitary completion of questionnaires may have prompted more conventional and politically correct responses. This is supported by Lea-Greenwood's (1999) argument that it is particularly difficult to study consumer opinions, attitudes and perceptions regarding ethical issues as they are a very sensitive area of research and consumers may give political correct or socially desirable rather than truthful answers. Furthermore, focus groups enable the researcher to ask follow up and more probing questions, an advantage that is not available with questionnaires.

It is evident from the present discussion that young consumers are influenced in their purchasing decisions by brand image, latest fashion and price. Their esteem needs to get accepted by their friends is of strong importance to them. Perhaps younger consumers have a different ethical perspective than other age groups, which should be investigated in further research.

Although the findings from this research did not demonstrate that ethical issues affect consumers' fashion behaviour, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions about ethical behaviour since only a specific age group was examined. Consumers do seem to need more information to allow them to make better ethical judgements and there is a role for ethical fashion companies to communicate this more effectively to increase the potential of ethical fashion.

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