

## CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY WITHIN FASHION

*Philippa Crommentuijn-Marsh<sup>a</sup>, Dr Claudia Eckert<sup>b</sup>, Prof. Stephen Potter<sup>c</sup>*

*<sup>a</sup>Phd Student, The Open University, UK*

*<sup>b</sup>Senior Lecturer, The Open University, UK*

*<sup>c</sup>Professor of Transport Strategy, The Open University, UK*

### ABSTRACT

The consumption of fashion has grown in recent years as the price of clothing have fallen leading to “cheap chic”, clothes that are worn a few times then discarded. This has led to various ethical and environmental concerns within the framework of sustainability. One response to these issues was Considerate Design which integrated these concerns into the design process. An exploratory study was conducted to examine consumer attitudes towards sustainability within the context of fashion including the Considerate Design concept. It was revealed that whilst consumers were concerned about the environment, there was a very low awareness of environmental issues and attitudes did not translate into action with very few buying ethical/green fashion. It was also apparent that consumers were inconsistent, acting differently to what their stated attitudes were, that whilst they wished to behave in a certain manner, circumstances forced them to behave otherwise. Emotionally, buying and wearing clothes was a very complex issue for people with certain items being much-loved, either as items cherished for many years or as recent impulse buys. Self-image was a primary concern for some. For others the opinions of their peer group influenced what clothes they wore. When shopping for clothes many factors were important to participants with sustainability the last on the list. It is evident that when designing for sustainability, the emotional needs and wants of customers must be taken into consideration.

***Keywords:** Apparel, Behaviour Observation, Emotional Behaviour, Individual, Subconscious*

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**Philippa Crommentuijn-Marsh:** The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK, email: philippa@crommentuijn.com

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Consumption is a social act as much as it is an economic one. Consumption bestows identity, self-perspective, status and the admiration of peers [1]. What we buy as consumers reflects how we feel about ourselves and how we would like others to view us. The clothing and fashion industry epitomizes this situation. Within the UK fashion consumption has grown between 2001 and 2005 by 37% in the amount of clothes purchased per capita. [2]. As the price of womens' clothing has fallen by a third in the last ten years the value end of the market (or cheaper clothing) is booming, doubling in size in just five years to £6 billion of sales in 2005 [3]. At the same time as clothes are becoming cheaper, companies are now offering new designs constantly throughout the year rather than the traditional fashion seasons. A culture of "cheap chic" has evolved with many clothes only being worn a few times before being discarded.

Yet despite this culture of over-consumption, there is a growing awareness of environmental issues amongst consumers in some social groups and more concern over the ethics of production of consumer goods as the increase in the overall ethical spend from consumers within the UK reveals. This reached 35.5 billion pounds at the end of 2007, up 15% from 31 billion from the previous twelve months. [4]. However this is still only a small fraction of the clothing market. Mintel estimates that the total sales of ethical clothing are currently worth 0.4% of the total market, with ethical consumers tending to be from the professional and managerial class who were also broadsheet readers. Within this research most of the people interviewed were from this social group [5] as they were more likely to be interested in ethical consumerism. This exploratory research examines consumer behaviour towards sustainability in fashion and revealed interesting contradictions amongst consumers who would like to buy more ethical and environmentally-friendly products yet are still locked into the fashion culture. While consumers proclaim concern for sustainability issues, their awareness rarely spans to fashion, where purchasing decisions are involved by numerous conscious and subconscious factors. A lack of awareness of the sustainability issues was a contributor to the participants' inaction in buying ethical/green fashion, but it was clear that buying clothing was a much more emotive subject than the buying of other ethical products such as fair-trade tea or the buying of green cleaning products. The participants demonstrated a rich variety of spending and wearing habits as on one level clothes are a basic functional necessity yet they played a much wider role within participants' lives. The buying of clothes linked into people's emotions and behaviour including what they thought about themselves and what they thought of others. The sustainability issue hardly featured at all. This paper explores sustainability within fashion, describes the methodology of the research, the results of the questionnaire with a full discussion of these results with implications for further research.

## 2. WHY DOES FASHION NEED SUSTAINABILITY?

Sustainability is defined by Bruntlandt [6] as "development that meets our need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Sustainability is the interlinking and equal consideration of the three major concerns of environmental, economic and social. There are many environmental and ethical implications of the global clothing industry. The major ones are labour, waste, water and pesticides. Given

that most clothes production is now in developing countries there have long been are concerns over the treatment and payment of clothing workers. For example, the labour cost for an £8 T-shirt sewn in Bangalore, India, is around 15 pence [7]. The amount of clothes bought every year leads to many being disposed of so frequently that approximately 1.5 - 2 million tonnes of clothing waste is created each year, discounting all the clothes that are sent to the third world, approximately 16% [8]. The demand for textiles results in intensive crop growing which is causing problems with water shortages, an example being the Aral Sea, where years of diverting water for cotton production have resulted in the Aral Sea shrinking by over 80% of its volume causing an environmental disaster [9]. Other environmental problems include pesticides that can cause health problems for farmers and dyes used in textile production, which can pollute local water resources.

Fashion designers are beginning to respond to these ethical and environmental concerns and one such response is *Considerate Design* [10]. This integrates environmental and user-centred considerations into the fashion design process by providing designers with ways to understand, visualise and trade-off different impact factors, while aiming to reduce consumption by meeting consumers' specific needs, for example through personalized clothes based on body scan data [10]. The aim is to decrease consumption by increasing the number of times garments are worn by providing customers with clothes they fit and that will last. It is envisaged that the overall environmental impact can be further reduced through sustainable fibres and local production. However, rather than optimizing one factor designers need to make trade-offs that reduced the overall impact. Within this research participants were asked what their response to a considerate design approach would be, both in terms of fit and in terms of sustainable consumption.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a two stage approach: interviews with consumers to clarify what the issues, from which a questionnaire was devised. Informed by the consumer classification from the MINTEL [11] and LOHAS [12], fourteen people, mostly in Leicester with varied backgrounds were selected and interviewed. Seven were women with children, aged between the early thirties to the late sixties, with a wide income and education range. Two teenage girls were interviewed along with three women without children and two men. One man was married with a child and declared a total lack of interest in fashion and the other was a young single man who had a very keen sense of fashion. Although the same questions were asked of all participants the interviews varied in length widely from 40 minutes to three hours. The longest interview was with a very keen ethical consumer who spent time researching exactly what she was going to buy. The shortest interview was with someone who had no real interest in ethical or ecological issues. The interviews were recorded and detailed summaries with key quotes were generated.

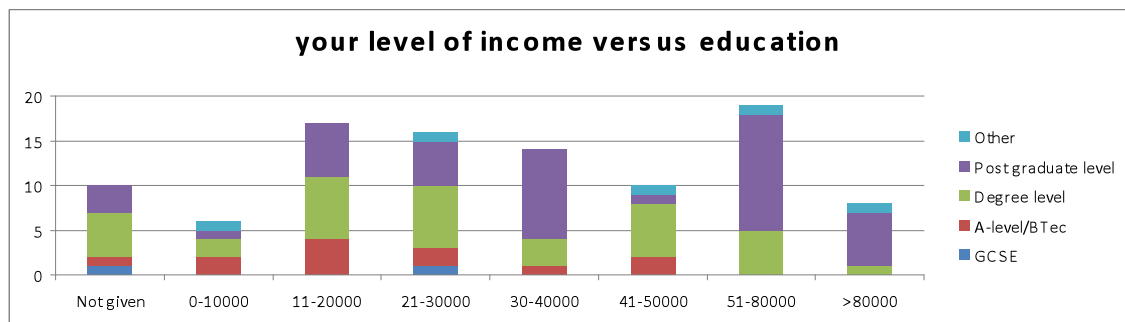
For the questionnaire, a list of questions were devised based on the interview and general literature, one section asking about general shopping habits and personal values and the second section specifically about clothes, how they bought them, how long they kept them, how they disposed of them etc. It used the New Ecological Paradigm [13] to calibrate the respondents' awareness of environmental and ecological worldviews. The questionnaire also

included ethical purchasing in general and food in particular along with the purchasing of clothes, as fair-trade emerged as the most widely known approach in the interviews. The questionnaire was distributed through the authors personal and professional networks, with 250 sent out and 98 were fully completed. Completed surveys were filled in by 64 females and 35 males, with the majority 47% being within the 30-40 years old range.

#### 4. THE RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

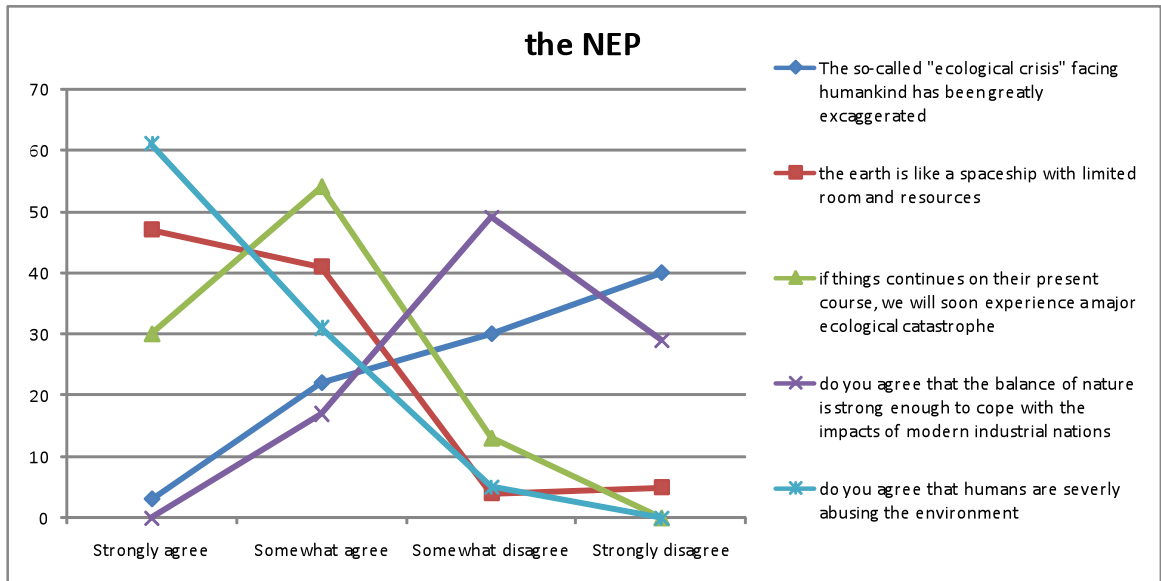
As the questionnaire revealed many facts, while the interviews provide the rationale behind them, the findings of the questionnaire will be discussed first.

Figure 1 shows the income and education range of the respondents. The largest group of respondents has a higher education qualification, 34% at degree level, 45% at post-graduate level, giving a total of 79%. The sample is clearly skewed with a total of 79% having higher educational qualifications, however these are groups that had been identified by MINTEL and LOHAS as the most likely green consumers. The annual family income (before tax) is relatively well-spaced out with the biggest category being the 51-80 000 pounds per annum at 19%, but it is only just the biggest, the second biggest category is 11-20 000 pounds per annum at 17%.



**Figure 1:** Income and Education level of respondents

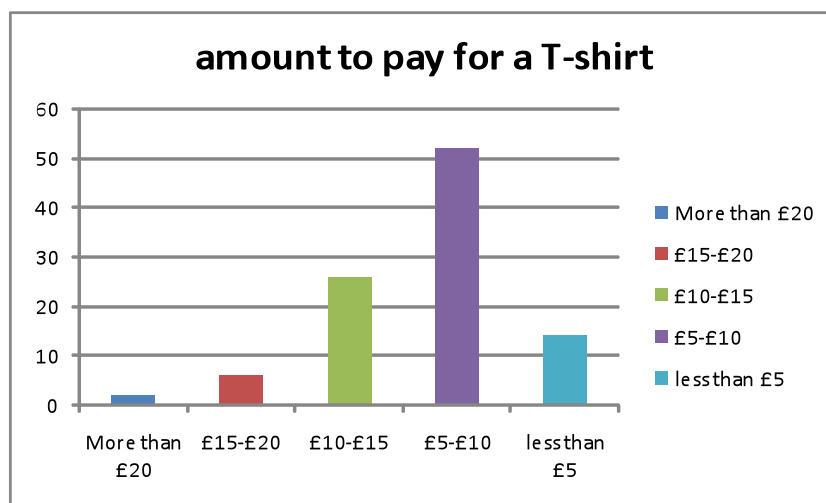
Table 2 shows the response to the New Ecological Paradigm which was used to measure people's ecological awareness. The New Ecological Paradigm comprises five statements, listed in captions of figure 2, with the number of respondents on the y-axis. If people strongly agreed/somewhat agreed with statements 2, 3 and 5 and somewhat disagreed/strongly disagreed with statements 1 and 4 then they demonstrate the worldview that human actions have substantial effects on a fragile biosphere [14]. As figure 2 demonstrates, the majority did agree with statements 2, 3 and 5 and the majority disagreed with 1 and 4 with percentages ranging from 71% through to 90%. This shows that the overwhelming majority of the respondents had a very high ecological awareness.



**Figure 2:** Response to the New Ecological Paradigm

It was found that 95.05% of respondents had an awareness of fair-trade movement. Fair-trade was used within the questionnaire as the interviews had indicated that respondents would be familiar with fair-trade, as it proved. Most did agree with the principles of fair-trade. Respondents indicated that they believed in principle in supporting fairer pay and prices, spending according to their principles and improving social conditions in the developing world. 80% of the respondents did buy fair-trade products but only 31% of respondents did purchase fair-trade clothing. In an open response box two main reasons given: they didn't know anything about them; and they did not know where to find them. So in principle people agreed with aims of fair-trade but this did not translate into action with clothing.

Figure 3 shows that despite the claims of environmental awareness the majority of people was not willing to spend enough on a T-shirt to enable them to purchase a sustainable product. 52% were prepared to pay no more than £10. So despite the high ecological awareness they still like clothes to be cheap and cheerful, particularly T-shirts.



**Figure 3:** Amount paid for a T-shirt

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1. Personal values and consumption

In the interviews these issues could be discussed in further depth. Stern et al [15] take the position that people's values are likely to be especially strong determinants of their pro-environmental actions because people often need to react to environmental conditions or problems on the basis of very limited knowledge or experience. All the participants agreed without hesitation that they were worried about the environment and all could mention issues that troubled them particularly such as the melting of the ice-caps. Personal values were also important to participants with several mentioning that values formed the basis for their shopping decisions. Some of them were keen on fair-trade products as they strongly agreed with fair-trade principles and wanted to feel that their purchasing certain products could make a difference to someone else within the developing world. Yet, despite this, discussion around the eco-label was relatively lukewarm with most participants suggesting that paying £5 or £10 more for clothes with an eco-label was reasonable but no more. When asked about sustainability as a general issue, there was a wide variety of answers which revealed that they didn't really know what it meant. Though most did guess that it was to do with the earth's resources and the fact that mankind was over-exploiting resources particularly the rich countries. There was a very low awareness of the environmental issues related to clothes production with the issue that most of them had heard about was clothes miles. When textiles are grown in one country, made into clothes in another then shipped to the UK to be sold. Most interviewees were unaware of the sheer complexity of the sustainability issues in clothes production. When it came to buying clothes, environmental and ethical considerations were extremely low down the list.

It became immediately clear that people were inconsistent with their behaviour,. They said one thing and inadvertently revealed that they did something else as demonstrated by expressing a concern over the environment, yet this did not extend to clothes buying. During the discussion about *Considerate Design*, the participants were noticeably more enthusiastic, however this turned out to be more targeted at the prospect of a more personalized fit than a reduced or sustainable consumption. Their enthusiasm did depend on how much particular garments would cost and some felt that whatever the additional cost was, it would be too much for them. Others felt that they were prepared to pay the extra for personalisation, some seeing it as a good opportunity to obtain garments in styles and colours they liked rather than being dictated to by the fashion industry. Those with problems finding clothes that fitted them really liked the idea of customized or tailored fitting. This was the biggest attraction for most participants. Some of the participants saw this as a great opportunity to have something special made such as a dress for the school prom or a coat that would last for ten to twenty years, an item that would be unique to them and so could be cherished for many years.

The majority of the participants did have items of clothing or shoes that were special to them and to which had formed emotional attachments to them and had kept for several years. One participant had kept some of her dresses from when she was young in the 1960s and the 1970s, as the dresses held special memories for her and she really liked them. Another had kept clothes from her mother such as a jacket as she loved the colour and the style of it and felt that it really suited her. Style was crucial for many. Most participants were keener on style than they were on keeping up with contemporary fashion. One participant explained

that the older she became, the more aware she was of what shapes and what colours suited her best. The most determined ethical participant applied ethical purchasing to every part of her life and naturally wore ethical clothing, or clothes she had bought in second hand shops. She claimed ethical considerations were far more important than keeping up with the latest fashion yet even she wanted to look nice and more stylish without compromising her principles.

## **5.2. Contradictory behaviour**

There was a contradiction for most participants in that they wanted to follow their principles but experienced a continual conflict between their personal values and their budget. People inadvertently contradicted themselves. One participant was extolling the virtues of living “The Good Life” as exemplified by the BBC’s sitcom series in the 1970s, before she was born. That was her ideal lifestyle, a life of self-sufficiency, however when asked what was the last item she had bought, it was a pair of £2 flip-flops from a leading supermarket chain, bought purely because they were cheap. She, along with other participants, knew that when they bought cheap items that whoever had made the item was very likely to have been paid very little. One participant felt a strong sense of guilt when he had bought an item recently that was “cheap and cheerful” and actively pushed his conscience to one side but at the same time felt quite helpless at the situation as he did not have the budget to buy a more expensive item. Another participant held the retailers to be completely responsible. She felt as a consumer she should not have to think of these issues but should be able to buy clothes with confidence that no-one had been exploited in the production of the items. Others felt that by buying second-hand clothes they were “recycling” clothing so therefore their conscience was at ease with itself as they felt they could do no more.

It was clear that when clothes buying there were certain considerations that were important, starting with the choice of shop that they were going to patronize in the first place. Most of the participants had their favourite retailers for the different clothes shopping that they did for example, Marks and Spencers, a traditional high street chain, for work clothes, Asda, a supermarket chain, for underwear. They tended to be fairly loyal to their chosen retailers.

## **5.3. Clothing and emotions**

The choosing of clothes is a very complex matter with so many factors involved going deeper than actual need. Purchases are “wants” as there is no real upper limit to how many clothes we can own, and in the western world garments are rarely worn to shreds. Needs and wants are not as clearly separable as many would have us believe: both are the product of social conformity and individual belongingness. A person’s own self-image is a mixture of social conformity, i.e. peer approval along with an expression of their own individuality [16]. Clothes were an important part of the participants’ self-image. One participant saying that she used clothes to project a certain self-image of herself, she did not elaborate on this but there was an indication that she was using clothes to try to give herself a certain identity. Other participants also used clothes for the state of mind they themselves were in, to dress up in a certain way or to cheer themselves up out of a bad mood. There were indications that

many of the participants did the same, using clothes to feel happier about themselves, particularly in the purchasing of clothes.

Almost every participant admitted to impulse buying, the falling in love with an item and buying it immediately. Some participants described how they saw a particular item of clothing in the shops and simply had to have it. For example one participant persuaded her mother to buy it for her as an early birthday present. It was interesting to note that the more principled of participants were less likely to impulse buy than the others. Shopping was more of a planned activity in that the particular clothing need was identified and therefore acted upon. A study of women's clothes wearing habits by Woodward [17] revealed that the pivotal dynamic which underpins how women choose what to wear is between clothing that is "easy" and "safe", such as day-to day wear, and clothing that allows women to transform themselves, usually a rare occasion. Sometimes women don't dare to wear certain items as they fear criticism or disapproval from within their peer group.

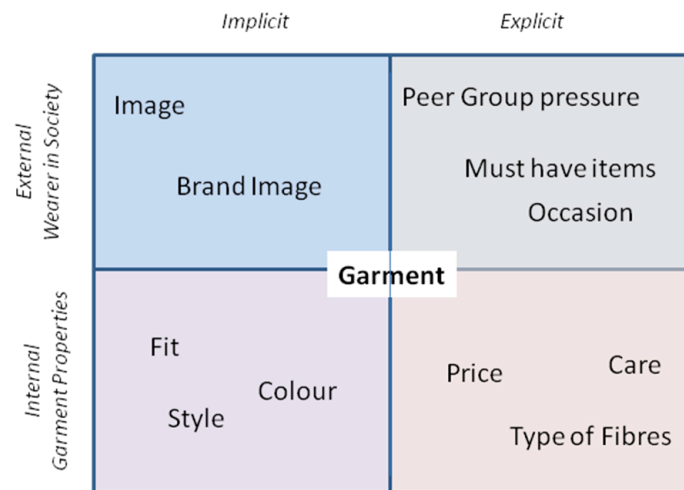
Many participants admitted that they judged others by the way in which they dressed with the youngest participants teenagers saying that unless they dressed in a certain way you risked being ostracized by other pupils at school. Another participant said that as he was part of several very different social communities he had to dress differently for example in the work situation he dressed smartly, usually in a suit but in a social situation he wore branded clothing as this was part of being accepted by this particular social group. It was acknowledged that judging people on what they wore was felt to be "wrong", as who they are as people is more important, yet the participants admitted that they couldn't help themselves forming these judgments.

#### **5.4. Rational and Irrational behaviour**

The interviews indicated clearly that for all participants purchasing clothing guided by a combination of rational and irrational behaviour. The way they purchase garments and the principles they apply to it, vary enormously for different types of garments and different situation. While they went to seek out certain items, they picked up others at the spur of the moment, in particular in supermarkets. Several participants commented that before buying any garment, they would check the care labels (i.e. is it machine washable) and the fibre content of a garment, and not buy garments unless they fulfilled the required criteria. This would indicate that consumer can and do apply rational filters to purchasing of textiles, however to date this does not appear to be applied to ethical and sustainable consumption.

In summary the purchasing of textile is influenced by a combination of explicit and tacit factors, some come from the garment itself, while others arose from the societal role of purchasing. Figure 4 shows a preliminary model of factors affecting the purchasing of garments.





**Figure 4:** Factors affecting the purchasing of fashion items

## 6. CONCLUSION

This initial study has helped identify a number of key issues that will be explored further within a further research project by the authors. As illustrated by ethical and sustainability issues, the purchasing behaviour of customers is not necessarily consistent with their principles and shows wide range of behaviours within groups of individuals, but also within the decisions of individuals, who are strongly influenced by tacit emotional decisions. The design community needs to engage with these emotional choices, to change the behaviour of their customers, no matter how good the rational arguments might be. For example sustainable textiles must appeal to people as design rather than through a rational statement. The authors will look in more detail the factors affecting fashion consumption and the ways the behaviour of different groups can be shifted.

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