Ethical Dimensions in Clothing Purchase

Jeffery Bray

Abstract:

It is widely reported that consumer interest in environmental and ethical issues is growing. Evidence suggests that ethical considerations are now impacting on a broad range of consumption decisions. The focus of this paper is the impact such concerns may hold in clothing purchase decision making. Through an inductive qualitative approach, clothing purchase decision making has been explored before discussing consumers' knowledge and concern of ethical issues within the supply chain. Any impact that these concerns may exert has been discussed.

It is identified that although there is widespread knowledge and understanding of the ethical issues that may be present in the manufacture of clothing, these concerns do not play a primary role in consumers' selection of items. Product attributes such as colour, style and fit dominate the decision making process in most cases. Despite this, ethical considerations can be seen to impact on the consumer in three key ways: initial boycott of particular products or brands; influencing final purchase decisions if items are similar on other criteria and, impacting on post-purchase satisfaction with the product.

Key Words: Ethics; Consumer Behaviour; Apparel; Clothing; Attributes of Choice.

1.   Introduction

The consumption environment and influences on the consumer decision making process have changed significantly over the past century, and continue to evolve. Consumer behaviour research highlights a number of factors which are currently influencing changes in consumption choices and practices. These include:
• Increasing concern for environmentalism,[1]
• Increasing politicisation of the consumer whereby the consumers' assessment of companies' ethical standards proves influential in their consumption choices,[2]
• Growing awareness of global issues such as resource depletion, and the working practices in developing nations.[3]

Due to the moral dimensions of these factors, it is commonly stated that 'ethical consumerism' is growing.[4]

Research focusing on the role ethical issues plays in purchasing behaviour is limited, with disproportionate attention being directed at the food sector[5] leaving the clothing sector under explored. The clothing industry has in the past received negative publicity surrounding 'sweatshop' type manufacturing resulting in partial boycotts of the affected brands. In recent months publicity of these issues has grown significantly, with 3 high profile television programmes in the UK in the spring of 2008 alone.

Clothing sales represent a fast growing retail sector, currently accounting for 15% of total consumer expenditure in the UK.[6] Both the EU and DEFRA have highlighted that Clothing is 'high impact' accounting for some 5-10% of the EUs total environmental impact. Other issues outlined include:

> 1.5-2m tonnes of waste generated in the UK
> 70m tonnes of waste water
> Child Labour
> Poor Working Conditions
> Low Wages
> H&S Risks
> Animal Welfare Issues
> Inequitable Trade[7]

The fashion retailing sector has changed significantly in recent years with dramatic unit price deflation feeding consumers' desire for highly fashionable items at a 'disposable price',[8] adding further pressure to clothing suppliers and retailers to tolerate lower ethical standards in the quest for competitive prices. Not only value clothing retailers, but mainstream players are seeking to serve this trend for disposable fashion, with H&M reported to be designing clothes that are expected to be used less than 10 times.[9]

Given the size of the clothing market, and the ethical issues that surround clothing manufacture there is a need for research to explore the role that ethical considerations may play in consumers' assessment and selection of clothing lines.

2.   Consumer Decision Making

How consumers make their decisions has long been studied, however it is only in the last 50-60 years that consumer behaviour researchers have acknowledged the full range of influences that may impinge on the
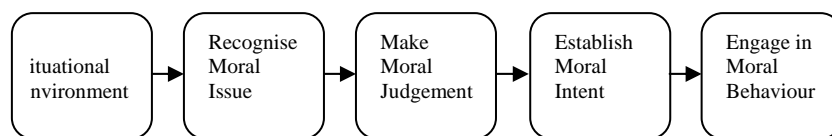
process.[10] A number of different approaches have been taken to explain consumer decisions. Economic theories were first posited, describing the consumer as entirely rational and self interested;[11] psychodynamic approaches suggested that behaviour is subject to biological influence through 'instinctive forces' or 'drives' which act outside of conscious thought,[12] while behavioural approaches take the opposing view, suggesting that behaviour is explained by external events, and causation is attributed to factors external to the individual.[13]

Most contemporary theories recognise the role of the consumers' individual cognition, with these cognitive approaches acknowledging a broad range of influences both internal and external to the actor guiding decisions.[14] One of the most cited such cognitive models is the Consumer Decision Model proposed by Blackwell, Miniard and Engel.[15] This model describes consumers passing through six key stages in the process of consumption, namely: need recognition; information search; pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives; purchase; consumption and post-consumption evaluation. Impinging on this process are a wide range of factors internal to the consumer and stimuli from the wider external setting.

While such cognitive models are widely accepted, a number of researchers have highlighted the egoism that is implied in such depictions,[16] suggesting that they may require some modification to encompass ethical product choices that may contain elements of altruism.

A number of researchers have attempted to model ethical decision making,[17] with the main studies adopting a similarly staged approach as depicted in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Synthesis of the main stages in Ethical Decision Making Theory[18]


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┌───────────┐   ┌───────────┐   ┌───────────┐   ┌───────────┐   ┌───────────┐
│ ituational│   │ Recognise │   │ Make      │   │ Establish │   │ Engage in │
│ nvironment│ → │ Moral     │ → │ Moral     │ → │ Moral     │ → │ Moral     │
│           │   │ Issue     │   │ Judgement │   │ Intent    │   │ Behaviour │
└───────────┘   └───────────┘   └───────────┘   └───────────┘   └───────────┘
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This approach focuses solely on the ethical elements of any decision process and do not readily embrace decision settings where the ethicality of the decision may be secondary to other more important attributes. Further, these contributions were intended to model general decision making and were not specifically aligned to a consumption setting. These models are entirely reliant on the actor perceiving an ethical issue,[19] and deeming it to be

significant enough to warrant extended processing: assumptions that may not be appropriate in the context of clothing purchase.

3.   Clothing Choice

There are a number of inherent challenges with studies into clothing purchase due to the diversity of purchase motive possible, and the variety of roles that clothing can perform. Studies have shown, for example, that the attributes of choice differ between casual clothing and smart clothing;[20] that body shape influences preferences;[21] that significant differences exist when looking at a product in-store or observing it in a catalogue;[22] and that demographic variables alter the key attributes assessed.[23] The variety of product attributes considered can, however, be broadly categorised as functional or symbolic.[24]

The growth of consumer interest into the ethicality of their fashion purchases has been well documented in recent years. However ethics has not been highlighted in the general literature on fashion evaluative considerations. A small number of studies have examined the influence of ethical attributes on fashion choice specifically; notably all of these studies have been published in the last 10 years highlighting the contemporary nature of these concerns. The most recent study found 'Commitment to social and environmental issues' to be very important to consumers,[25] with 82% of the 1,185 respondents believing that retailers are not doing enough to tackle social and environmental issues. However this variable was identified by the researchers, possibly leading respondents to give socially desirable answers.[26] A consistent finding across all studies is that ethical or environmental factors are secondary to other product attributes for most consumers, with shoppers unwilling to compromise or reduce personal benefit to purchase more ethical products.[27] Despite these challenges it does appear that ethical considerations do hold some impact on the purchase decision with consumers experiencing guilt when selecting the less ethical alternative,[28] and feeling emotionally better (having higher self-esteem) when purchasing the ethical or more environmental choice.[29]

4.   Methodology

An inductive exploratory approach was adopted to explore fashion purchasing, ascertain the key attributes used in the decision making process, and to identify any contribution that ethical factors might hold in influencing purchase decisions in this context. Firstly a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore consumers' awareness of ethical issues within the clothing industry and to identify the most widely understood

terminology. These interviews informed the design of focus groups which were used to explore the issues in depth.

Focus group discussions were the most effective method to generate ideas and ensure that the subject area was probed from a number of different angles and from different perspectives that could not necessarily have been imagined by the researcher in advance. In a short writing task, participants identified the key factors that they considered when selecting an item of clothing. This free response method ensured minimal researcher interference, and provided an up-to-date list of the attributes considered by consumers. Using these lists as a starting point, participants discussed how they selected clothing lines, at this point unaware of the precise nature of the research; this semi covert approach being necessary and justifiable[30] due to the low risks that it posed to participants, and the need to reduce any social desirability bias.[31] After these attributes had been fully explored, participants were asked to identify any ethical factors that they were aware of before these factors were discussed in relation to their clothes purchasing behaviour.

A total of three focus groups were conducted, each of which was transcribed verbatim prior to analysis. Data submersion followed by a repetitious process of coding and recoding allowed the key themes to emerge.[32] After preliminary analysis, findings were discussed with six participants in validation interviews to ensure that the findings were presented in a clear manner and were a true reflection of the focus group discussions.

4.   Results and Analysis

When asked to identify the attributes used to select clothing items no participant identified any ethically relevant factors. Despite this, participants had a good level of awareness of potential ethical issues in the clothing supply chain, and had a clear preference toward the purchase of ethical alternatives where these were available and did not require compromise in other areas such as the look of the item. Further, some respondents described feelings of guilt when outlining that their own purchasing may be directed toward ethically questionable products.

Analysis of the focus group discussions suggests that ethical factors may influence the consumption process in three specific ways labelled here by the author as:
Ethical Red Line
Ethical Clouding
Post Purchase Reflection

Ethical Red Line

Early in the process of selection, some consumers will boycott selected items based on a small number of ethically relevant factors. For one focus group member, a critical decision point such as this was reached with the boycott of items using fur. While the use of fur was the most readily recalled example of this effect, other participants more generally stated that 'everyone's got their own line that they won't want to cross' (Female, 19) suggesting that for a number of consumers, products could be ruled out if the perceived ethics of the item were strongly dissonant to their own beliefs.

Ethical Clouding

With no respondent identifying any ethically relevant factors when recalling the attributes they have recently used to select clothing lines, it could be assumed that such factors hold no significance in purchasing. Even though the evaluative content of clothing purchase was discussed in each focus group at length, with such a wide number of factors influencing decisions it would not be possible to identify every attribute.

Given this, it would be unwise to discount the possibility that ethical attributes may play a role in the evaluation of alternatives. Discussions suggested that these issues are not influential in the consumer reaching a preliminary choice; however, once such a preliminary choice had been made, the preference for ethically positive or benign products may then influence the likelihood of purchase, or sway a decision should the consumer be undecided between two or more similarly attractive items. This effect has been labelled here as 'Ethical Clouding'. When discussing this relationship in one validation interview the interviewee concurred giving the example of shopping for a pair of socks: "I'd firstly look for those that were black, the right size, within my price range, and made of cotton, then if one type were Fair-Trade, I'd probably take those." (Female, 29) This view is supported by many comments in the focus group discussions and each of the validation interviews where respondents were keen and enthusiastic to consume ethically but were unprepared to compromise on other attributes.

The importance of most individual product attributes varies dependent on the item of clothing being sought. However, given that ethical assessments pertain to fixed principles detached from the item considered, it is likely that any influence of ethical indicators will be constant irrespective of the specific item being examined. Thus for some items the influence of ethical attributes is sufficiently prevalent to direct purchasing, where for other items the same scale of influence may not be sufficient to differentially affect decisions due to strong preferences on other attributes. This might go some way to explain why ethically labelled clothing lines are often basic

clothing lines such as undergarments where a smaller range of attributes are considered important leaving greater potential influence to the constant, though minor in most cases, influence of ethics.

Post Purchase Reflection

A preference towards ethically labelled products was discussed in all focus groups, and in some cases members described feelings of guilt when purchasing items that they felt might have been produced in an unethical manner. Given this, it is probable that an item of clothing labelled as fair-trade, or organic would engender positive feelings in the consumer when using the product, with the converse applying if there were any negative ethical indicators. The resulting post-purchase reflection and resulting satisfaction may influence future purchase decisions and the importance afforded to these factors.

Memory and Retail Brand

The research found that consumers use their existing knowledge of the retail brands on the high-street to guide their search for items, using retail brand as a heuristic, informing likely price, quality and style of the goods contained within. Participants also appeared comfortable using the retail brand to indicate the ethical standards likely to be present throughout the supply chain.

5.   Conclusions

It is clear from the research conducted here that ethical considerations are not primary in most clothing purchase decisions. Despite this, it has been found that ethics might hold some influence in three key points within the decision making process. It is likely that the scale of this influence will depend on the individual consumer and situational factors.

Figure 2 presents a Model of Ethics in Clothing Purchase Behaviour which summarises the research findings. At first glance it appears that the model is suggesting a strict and formalised process, however the individual and situational differences introduce the flexibility to account for passage through the model at different speeds and affording differing depths of engagement at the various stages. Further, many aspects may be accomplished without conscious thought, the selection of key stores for example may not be thought about, rather a product of habits formed through previous experiences. Dashed lines have been used to make clear that the ethical influence exerted at this point is variable dependant on the individual's personality and moral views, and acknowledges that for some consumers no obvious effect may be apparent.

Given the size of the clothing industry, it is important for producers, retailers and marketers to fully understand each factor that may influence the consumer. This research provides a starting point from which the effect of ethical influences that are currently subject to much media attention may be assessed. Further research is required in this area, possibly of a more quantitative nature to test the relationships suggested here, and to assess their relative importance on purchase decisions.

Figure 2: Model of Ethics in Clothing Purchase Behaviour

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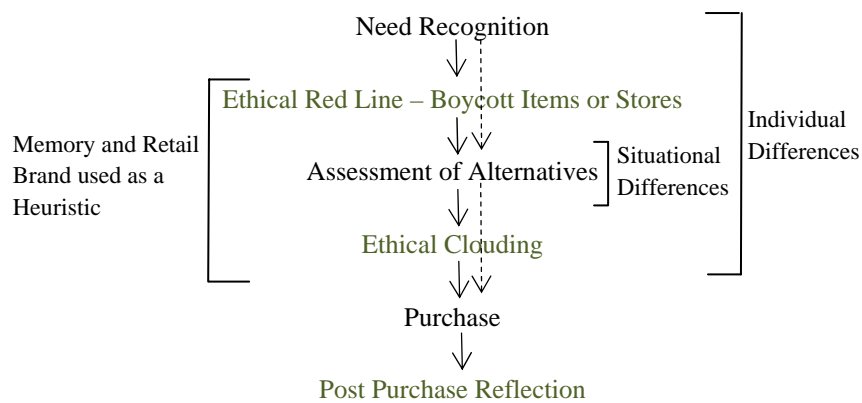
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