

Fashion Victim? : The Impact of Sweatshop Concerns on Clothing Choice

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Abstract

The increase in concern for ethical issues among consumers has been well-documented in literature. The context of clothing, however, remains less developed. Research and the media have highlighted sweatshop labour concerns in clothing as pertinent issues impacting consumer decision-making, however, this market remains under-developed restricting choice in this area. This paper details findings from interviews that explore behavioural intention to avoid sweatshop labour in clothing choice and resultant behaviour.

Keywords: ethics, consumer behaviour, clothing,

1. Introduction

The growing awareness among consumers of the environmental and social impact of their own consumption has led to the increased demand for more ‘ethical’ product alternatives. Studies have confirmed the existence and continued growth of a group of consumers for whom ethical issues drive consumption behaviour (Doane, 2001). Ethical concerns are very broad and in some way are applicable to every product and service, they include both environmental and societal concerns (Kim et al 1998). This study addresses the latter, concerns about sweatshop labour practices in clothing production that impact upon consumer choice (Weadick, 2002). Despite recent media attention and consumer concern, this ethical context has been neglected in consumer research. The aim of this research is to examine consumers’ intention to avoid sweatshop manufactured clothing and their actual behaviour.

Although many ‘ethical’ product sectors are now well-established with their own labeling certifications that aid consumer decision-making, much of this development has been in the food sector where examples include, fair trade, animal welfare and organics. Consumer concern in other product sectors, notably fashion and clothing where child labour and worker’s rights are pertinent issues, is exerting pressure for similar action. As yet, however, consumer decision-making cues such as labeling, are not readily available in this sector. In this context, therefore, ethically concerned consumers may find themselves confronted by uncertainty in terms of both information available for choice and the consequences of their actions (Shaw & Duff, 2002). Using the example of a t-shirt, choice criteria may include the ‘people’ issue of whether the t-shirt is fairly traded or made under sweatshop conditions. The consumer may consider country of origin and working conditions and wish to purchase a garment produced in their home country. These concerns must also be coupled with traditional choice criteria such as price, quality, convenience and availability. Conflict can arise, for example, between a concern to trade fairly with poorer countries, to promote their economies and a desire to support home-country production. In such a situation the purchase of a traditionally low involvement product such as a t-shirt can require substantially more effort on the part of the consumer in decision-making. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a ‘words/deeds inconsistency’ has been reported in terms of a weak relationship between what consumers say, and what they do (Gill et al., 1986). Thus, while an individual may state that they intend to avoid sweatshop labour when purchasing clothing, difficulties at the point of decision-making may result in apparent behavioural inconsistency.

Previous research indicates that consumers prioritise their ethical concerns to a limited number they consider they can ‘cope’ with when making consumption choices (e.g., Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Newholm, 2000). This makes the selection of a central behavioural focus pertinent in ethical consumption contexts. Specific research exploring ethical issues in clothing choice is limited (e.g., Dickson, 2001; Shaw & Duff, 2002); an exploratory study by Tomollilo & Shaw (2003) revealed that sweatshop labour was the most important ethical issue in clothing choice among ethical consumers. Although there are a number of definitions of ‘sweatshop’, it can be loosely defined as factory production in which employees are exploited by means of low wages, excessive working hours, under age employees, or other exploitative practices, frequently but not exclusively in developing economies where labour laws and workers rights can be less rigorous (see for example, Weadick 2002, Lopez-Calva 2001).

The aim of the present study is to examine consumers’ ethical intentions to avoid purchasing sweat shop produced clothing and their actual purchase behaviour. The specific objectives are

- To compare ethical consumers intended behaviour when purchasing clothing and their actual purchases
- To identify the constraints that impact upon ethical consumer behaviour in this context

This research is not concerned with the actual practices of manufacturers or retailers regarding the use or abuse of sweatshop labour, rather we are concerned with the behaviour of consumers in the UK with regard to their purchase of clothing that they *perceive* to be either ethically or unethically produced.

2. Methodology

To address the research aims it was essential to access sample of consumers with a strong ethical stance who were likely to take steps to avoid purchasing sweat shop produced clothing. In stage 1 therefore a questionnaire was sent to a purposive sample of subscribers to the UK magazine ‘Ethical Consumer’. Measures of behavioural intention were obtained as recommended by Ajzen & Fishbein (1980) and a group of 262 consumers were identified as having a strong behavioural intention to avoid the purchase of sweatshop clothing. In stage 2, telephone interviews were then conducted with these consumers 6 weeks after the completion of the original questionnaire to identify their actual purchase behaviour in that period. The telephone interviews were semi-structured and covered clothing purchases in the preceding 6 weeks, obstacles to exercising choice and specific influencing factors.

3. Brief Overview of Research Results

Purchasing

The respondents to this survey were self selecting ethical consumers who had declared a strong intention to avoid sweat shop produced clothing. Of the 260 consumers who agreed to be interviewed, 200 (75%) had made clothing purchases in the time period. The majority of respondents had bought between 1 and 4 items of clothing in this time period. However, when asked what proportion were sweatshop free, only 32% of respondents believed that they had made purchases that were sweatshop free. Of the remainder, the majority either had purchased items knowing that they were unlikely to be sweatshop free, or were unable to assess whether their purchases were ethical or not. Indeed, despite clear intentions to purchase sweatshop free clothing, over 60% of those interviewed agreed that they didn't know whether their purchases were sweatshop free or not. As a result it was impossible to arrive at a comparison of behavioural intention and actual behaviour without extensive further research on the brands or retailers used. Initial attempts at categorizing purchases suggest that fewer than 30% of actual purchases could be classified as emanating from manufacturers who could be demonstrated not to use sweatshop labour. The respondents found that verifying information regarding manufacturing polices of large brands, many of whom employ extensive sub – contractors, was both complex and time consuming and as a result rarely carried out. Although respondents intended to act ethically, it was difficult to do so; indeed the barriers to ethical behaviour in this context were perceived by the majority of respondents to be unassailable within the High Street.

Constraints

Four main constraints were identified when attempting to purchase sweatshop free clothing: lack of information regarding the brands or retailers that are sweatshop free; difficulties in accessing ethical retailers; the limited range offered by ethical retailers; and the nature of ethically produced clothing. The most widespread problem was identified as the lack of information relating to the origins of the product and the company's policy regarding sweatshop produced clothing. Consequently, consumers "have no way of knowing" if garments originated in a sweatshop. One respondent explained how this has resulted in a decline in intention to avoid potential sweatshop purchases,

"You can't find out any information from shops, and other sources. I used to buy as much sweatshop free as possible, but the lack of information has made it so difficult I no longer worry about it." (R 135)

The most commonly used cue to distinguish between sweatshop and non-sweatshop clothing is country of origin. For example, several respondents assumed that provided the label stated 'Made in the UK' or the 'EU' then it was sweatshop free. Others used the premise that if the country of origin was a developing country the item must have been made in a sweatshop and was therefore avoided, but if it was a developed country it would be "OK".

"I look at the label, if it's from a developing country I assume it's sweatshop goods, but if it's from a developed country it wouldn't have been made in a sweatshop". (R34)

Respondents also avoided garments made in "notorious" or "dubious" countries, the most common example given being China. Clearly, the use of these cues is problematic as it implies that any country wishing to improve labour conditions by encouraging ethical

manufacturing, is in effect hampered by a country of origin reputation, which may act against social change. It could also be interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism by assuming that sweatshop labour is not used in European countries, which makes them a superior supplier.

The second most commonly used cue in this context is the reputation of the brand or retailer. A number of retailers were identified as having a 'reputation' for their ethical – or lack of ethical – practices. Gap and Nike were the most commonly cited examples of retailers who are associated with sweatshop labour and therefore should be avoided. In practice however, some respondents did shop at Gap and justified this in terms of either the availability and price of the items or the lack of choice from ethical retailers. Conversely some retailers and brands were associated with non sweatshop labour, one high street chain (BHS) was mentioned in particular as like to be sweatshop free and smaller, independent brands were assumed to be more ethical than large, luxury brands. These judgments, however, are being made on little or no evidence about the practices of the organizations involved.

Factual information regarding a retailer's ethical practices was generally obtained from media, such as newspapers, magazines, and TV. A number of consumers claimed that they carried out background research into companies before they bought anything from them. Various sources were used in this research process including the internet, both the company in question's own website and other ethically informative sites, and the company Code of Conduct would be obtained and read along with the Corporate Policy. This is obviously time consuming and leaves little room for making impulse purchases. An organizations staff were regarded as an unreliable source of data. Whilst a number of respondents stated that they asked in store about the company's policy regarding sweatshop manufacturing and the origins of certain garments, this was regarded as problematic as staff rarely know this information, "they tend not to know whether products are ethical or not and claim they have to make a living regardless" (R204), and where they do give answers, respondents felt they were untrustworthy, "the staff won't tell you the truth anyway"(R.189).

A small number of respondents also mentioned that they looked for 'Fair Trade Marks' on labels in order to determine the ethical manufacture of products or use publications such as *Ethical Consumer* for guidance. The degree of external search effort required, however, to establish the ethical credentials of fashion products was considerable. A number of trusted ethical retailers such as Gossypium, Bishopston Trading, and Green Fibres which guarantee the origin of the products were mentioned. However, these sources were generally mail order, stock limited ranges, were perceived to be aimed at the female market and were not perceived as being fashionable. One respondent commented

"If you want to be fashionable its very hard to be ethical" (R47)

The final issue with regard to ethical clothing purchase was the clothing bought in charity shops. A number of respondents believed that clothing purchased from charity shops was an ethical purchase, regardless of its original provenance as the money was being given for charitable purchases. However, over half of the respondents who had purchased from charity shops agreed that this clothing was not likely to be sweatshop free and they therefore did not regard it as an ethical choice. This is indicative of the complex relationship between

retailer and producer; is it, for example, possible to be an ethical retailer if the brands sold are not ethically produced? To what extent do consumers make assumptions about the production of clothing based on the reputation of the retailer rather than the manufacturer.?

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This research specifically concentrated on self categorized ethical consumers and as such the results are of particular concern. Despite clear intentions to purchase ethically, 68% of respondents had either not purchased sweatshop free clothing or were unable to decide whether their purchases were ethical or not. Indeed the constraints to purchasing sweatshop free clothing were seen as a constraining factor by almost 90% of the respondents. Those who had successfully purchased sweatshop free clothing agreed that the cost in terms of choice, style and expense was such that only committed consumers were likely to choose this option. For the remainder the difficulties were such that they were unlikely to regularly exercise an ethical choice in this context.

Given the importance and size of the clothing market this is an important finding. Sweatshop produced clothing is perceived to dominate the market to such an extent that even this group of committed ethical consumers were generally unable to exercise their behavioural intention to purchase ethically because they lacked both the information and the opportunity to do so. Thus whilst this group of respondents wish to consume ethically, the constraints to acting upon this intention are such that it becomes impossible to do so without considerable additional effort. Given that research in other sector, notably food, had indicated that availability and information are the most important driving factors when exercising ethical consumption choices, this lack of information is likely to restrict the demand for ethically produced clothing. Within this research even ethically committed consumers do not purchase sweatshop free clothing because it is perceived to be too difficult.

This research raises a number of questions for future research, in particular about the use of cues by consumers to approximate missing information. If these cues are not in some way revisited by the consumer and validated for their accuracy, they become static and not only unreliable but may work against the efforts of countries or organizations to improve working conditions. If certain countries have a reputation for tolerating sweatshop production, how does this impact upon the economy of the country and what is the impact upon local employees if consumers in developed economies choose to boycott goods produced in certain countries?

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