

The Power of Conscience Consumption

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Abstract

This paper is based upon a study conducted during the winter of 2008 questioned 59 Drexel University freshmen on their purchasing decisions. The purpose of the study was to determine whether ethical issues affect Generation Y consumer behavior. The results determined style, fit, and color as the first factors considered when purchasing garments. Price is also an essential factor and often serves as the final determinant in a purchase. Therefore, consumers are driven by reduced prices rather than product quality. Garments are easily disposed of after a single season instead being cherished as an addition to a wardrobe. Consumerism has become a practice of isolationism in which shoppers only consider the personal impact of their purchases.

Introduction

Today's consumerism is driven by selfish priorities that shelter consumers from the global impact of their purchasing behavior. A study conducted during the winter of 2008 questioned 59 Drexel University freshmen on their purchasing decisions. The purpose of the study was to determine whether ethical issues affect Generation Y consumer behavior. The results determined style, fit, and color as the first factors considered when purchasing garments. Price is also an essential factor and often serves as the final determinant in a purchase. Considering price, Deborah Brodahl of Kansas State University analyzed diverging consumer ideals between the United States and Europe. She found that in the US, "the consumer 'wins' by being able to acquire a lot with practically no money," whereas in Europe, "the consumer 'wins' by buying the most 'perfect' object" (Brodahl 12). These contrasting ideals redefine the concept of getting more for your money. In the US more means quantity but in Europe it means quality. The US consumers are driven by reduced prices rather than product quality. Garments are easily disposed of after a single season instead being cherished as an addition to a wardrobe. The results further suggest the ignorance of Generation Y consumers on the ethical issues revolving around their purchases in that not one of the 59 students even attempted to define Corporate Social Responsibility, or CSR. Consumerism has become a practice of isolationism in which shoppers only consider the personal impact of their purchases.

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Consumers are completely ignorant of the social and environmental consequences of garment production. The first stage of the production process consists of natural and synthetic textile fabrication. In the case of natural fibers the concerns revolve around the rights of farmers and the environment. In most situations pesticides and fertilizers jeopardize the land, water, and health of farmers and their families. Cultivation is done by means of energy expending machines and sometimes laboring children. Synthetic fibers are developed within factories that endanger workers and the environment through the use of hazardous chemicals. These chemicals pollute the air and water and potentially harm the workers. The next step in the production process is garment manufacturing. Factory workers are often denied their rights and are victims of abuse and manipulation. Health and safety precautions are not consistently provided leaving workers susceptible to injury and illness. In 2004, attention was brought to Forever 21, a top retailer selected by the surveyed students. An LA factory, where 40% of Forever 21's merchandise is produced, paid workers "less than minimum wage, with no benefits or overtime pay," (Pomerantz 2). Forever 21's practice of fast fashion, the rapid production of cheap clothing, impairs the manufacturers' ability to ensure the rights of workers. After garment manufacturing, the merchandise moves to the retail level where consumers decide to purchase a garment or to reject it. At the retail level maintaining a store involves energy consumption and upholding employee rights. Once purchased, a garment continues to impact the environment through the laundering process and disposal. Kate Fletcher, a sustainable design consultant and lecturer on Eco Design, asserts that the majority of a garments' "environmental impact comes from laundering," (Fletcher 75). In fact, Fletcher found that the "use" stage of a garment could impact the environment up to three times that of its manufacturing stage. These impacts consist of solid waste, air emissions, waterborne effluents, and energy consumption. As for disposal, "clothes and shoes take up more space than any other nondurable goods in the solid waste stream" (MacEachern 221). All of these steps are connected by the impact of transportation. The succession of moving textiles to manufacturers, then garments to retailers, and finally consumers to stores involve an accumulation of air pollution from vehicle emissions. These issues are enhanced by consumer demand but ignored in consumer purchasing decisions.

To address the social and environmental detriment generated by retailers the term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been coined. CSR is the concept that corporations should be obligated to measure and manage the social and environmental consequences of their actions. This obligation is directed towards shareholders. Although not typically viewed as a shareholder, consumers do invest in a company through their purchasing decisions. Assuming that transparency of corporate ethical issues hinders or enhances consumer purchasing, retailers should be obligated to reveal any and all information pertaining to ethical issues. Despite this logic, CSR remains extremely controversial. Critics question the context of corporate "obligations" because of its unrealistic implications. Businesses lack the capacity to maintain morals and are therefore only obligated to obtain success in terms of profit. Ethics are easily

jeopardized by corporate lack of conscience and the drive for profit. It is easy to assume that the government regulates CSR; after all, it is the government's responsibility to protect human rights. Unfortunately, this assumption is incorrect; in fact, there currently is not any defined party responsible for these issues.

The lack of responsibility within retailers is again rooted in the concept of fast fashion. Growing demand requires escalation in production and speed, and therefore the need for cheap labor. As a result retailers are increasing production in foreign suppliers where US legislation does not apply. In offshore production, retailers are the customers and factories the service provider. The lack of legislation permits factories to do anything to ensure the cheapest labor. Retailers do not feel responsible because they are independent from the suppliers. Even domestic factories, as in Forever 21's case, do not always ensure compliance with social and environmental policies. Many cases are not evident because of the lack of legislation. Retailers are not required to investigate their suppliers' compliance with social and environmental codes. To do so is voluntary and can potentially harm a company's reputation therefore jeopardizing profit. Failure to issue responsibility in terms of legislation and corporate policies has fostered the ethically tainted fashion industry of today.

This is where the role of the consumer becomes critical. With retailers refusing to take responsibility and legislation failing to distribute it, accountability falls upon the consumer. Diane MacEachern, an environmental writer explains, "Corporate need for profit gives consumers power," (MacEachern xii). This means that consumers have the ability to influence corporate actions through their spending habits. Profit is determined by consumers and these consumers have the potential to be compassionate; to spend their money funding companies and products that abide by their personal ethics.

The dominant force in the fashion industry is the middle class. The middle class is powerful because of its vast size and therefore its control of demand. Elaine Stone, a former professor at FIT explains, "Because it the largest class, it has the majority vote in the adoption of fashions" (Stone 44). Middle class consumers determine the acceptance and rejection of trends through their spending habits. This is not the first time consumers have steered the fashion industry. It started in the 1950s, when the youth of America's acceptance of blue jeans and t-shirts inspired designers to develop the otherwise lower-class garments into their upper-class lines (Beate Dorothea Schmid, *Icon of Fashion* 77). It continued into the 60s with the "Mods", "Rockers", and "Hippies" (Jane Mulvagh 86). These subcultures were heavily influenced by music and generally maintained a "do-it-yourself approach" in which consumers customized mainstream and second hand garments. In the late 60s and early 70s "Radical Chic" followers or Bohemians glorified second hand clothing and army surplus stores creating political statements and promoting individuality (Caroline Evans 100). From here came the "Punks", "Grunge" and "Hip-Hop". All were inspired by music and initiated by consumers, not dictated by corporate

designers. Understanding this trickle up approach is important because it builds consumer confidence and recognition of individual power. Functioning as part of a whole, consumer devotion to ethical merchandise has the potential to revise the entire fashion industry.

The first and easiest step towards ethical consumption is simply to read and understand clothing labels. Typically a clothing label will include care instructions, fabric content, and the country of origin. Care instructions are critical in determining the environmental impact of garment laundering. Consumers should avoid purchasing garments that require harsh chemicals and excess energy consumption. For instance, dry cleaning involves the use of the toxic chemical known as perc which “has been linked to reproductive problems, including miscarriage and male infertility, as well as disorders of the central nervous system” (MacEachern 241). In addition to dry cleaning, shoppers should avoid clothes that require ironing and laundering in warm water. Kate Fletcher found that, “Eliminating tumble drying (which accounts for 60 percent of the use phase energy) and ironing, in combination with a lower washing temperature, has been calculated to lead to around 50 percent reduction in energy consumption of the product” (Fletcher 81). Ultimately the most practical method of reducing the impact of laundering is to re-define clean. Households need to establish better habits in which clothing is only washed when absolutely necessary. Washing garments after several uses as well as utilizing spot cleaning techniques reduces waste and energy consumption, and prolongs the life of a garment.

Next on garment labels is the fabric content. It is difficult to assess the overall environmental and social impacts of fabrics because each varies throughout its lifecycle. For example, bamboo is notorious for being environmentally friendly because of its abundance, fast restoration rate, and natural resistance to pests. However, after the cultivation stage, the crop has to be broken down into a useable fiber. This process is difficult and results in toxic air emissions and hazardous water effluents (Fletcher 14). Consumers should focus on fabrics that are certified organic and produced from recycled materials. Recycled fibers require less energy, chemicals, and resources, and in some cases actually decrease landfill waste. For example, some retailers are using consumer and industrial waste such as plastic bottles to produce textiles like polyester.

The final aspect of the garment tags is the country of origin. Labeling laws permit retailer flexibility when determining the country of origin, however this factor is still important in purchasing decisions. The flexibility allows different aspects of a garment to be produced in a variety of countries with only the one in which each piece is attached to be identified. This can be deceiving when determining the environmental and social impact of a garment. For US consumers the most reliable country of origin is that of the United States. To bear “Made in the U.S.A.,” the materials used and the garment itself must both be constructed within the United States. Buying products made domestically reduces transportation impacts and helps to ensure workers’ rights. In the future, it is hoped that garment labels will also include a standard measurement of the social and environmental impacts making conscience consumption easier.

Without this, consumers are currently forced to determine their own ethical judgments of a garment through comprehension of care instructions, fabric content, and country of origin.

The next step towards ethical consumption is the support of sustainable standards. Sustainable standards are established by government, non-government, and third party organizations. These groups have developed guidelines that businesses can invoke to improve their social and environmental impacts. Compliance with organization standards permits businesses to display certification logos on their merchandise. There is a wide variety of organizations working both independently and collaboratively to develop the most effective standards. In addition, these standards usually pertain to a specific topic within the social and environmental scope. For instance, TransFair USA is a non-profit organization that works to ensure manufactures and farmers are provided with a consistent wage. The organization inspects for compliance with the Fair Trade Standards, which defines a minimum price to protect worker wages. A second example is the United States Department of Agriculture's Certified Organic. The USDA is attempting to reduce the manipulation of consumers with its own certification standard. Most USDA Certified Organic products are currently in the food industry but the standard can also be applied to textile production.

As a consumer it is easy to become overwhelmed with the variety of standards and issues. It is important to prioritize before to making purchasing decisions. Consumers need to select the ethical issues that are central to their morals. This can be difficult to determine but it is impossible to find a retailer that satisfies every priority of every consumer. Penelope Cook, the founder and owner of Equa, a sustainable fashion boutique, explains, "At some point, you just have to identify what you care about and what you can reasonably do, and then act" (Penelope Cook 238). Choosing a cause, whether is be eliminating child labor or supporting organic textiles, is essential to ethical consumption. Once the issue to be addressed is determined, consumers need to research sustainable standards and individual retailers that are working to improve it. Hennes and Mauritz, a Swedish retailer better known as H&M, provides measurements and clear definitions of its social and environmental impacts on their website. H&M provides measurement reports, collaborative effort details, its code of conduct, and even videos to help consumers recognize its efforts. When it comes to researching the ethical issues in fashion, Internet sources like retail and organization websites and bloggers are critical. One example is Rebecca Luke's Sustainable Style Foundation (SSF). SSF is a nonprofit organization "with a mission to educate, support, and inspire people...to make sustainable lifestyle choices" (Luke 85). To accomplish this, SSF has developed its own certification guidelines of which corporations must follow to receive a rating. The rating and areas of compliance verses noncompliance are easily accessible on the SSF website. In the future a database where consumers can learn about the social and ethical impacts of all retailers through standard measurements and unbiased information will hopefully be established. Until this database is

established purchasing ethically requires consumer efforts to shift from searching for the best deal to determining the garment with the best social and environmental impacts.

The final step towards ethical consumption is to practice the Three R's: reduce, reuse, and recycle. With the production methods used in the fashion industry today, the only real solution to diminishing the social and environmental impacts is to reduce consumption. Shifting consumer focus from quantity to quality will propel the adoption of buying less. Buying a garment of quality consists of purchasing clothes that will sustain both in durability and style. Consumers should purchase merchandise that is made to last, not to be disposed of. They should also buy goods that are considered classic, consisting of styles that can be worn for more than one season and can appeal to a variety of occasions. Consumers should also consider shopping at second-hand stores. Clothing that has been lightly used can be found at moderate prices and can inspire an individual sense of style. Next, consumers need to reuse or repair clothing. Clothing can be mended into its original state or transformed to perform a new function. Old t-shirts can be cut into cleaning rags, torn jeans can be sewn into totes, patches can fix rips, and buttons can be replaced. A mended garment not only reduces consumption and saves money; it adds sentiment to a wardrobe. This emotional bond to clothing is what fashion is all about. The final action to follow is to recycle. Recycling can consist of donating garments to second hand shops like the Salvation Army or Goodwill, swapping it with friends and family, or even selling it. Some retailers are establishing programs in which used garments are either bought or accepted as donations. Urban Outfitters, the top retailer listed by the surveyed students, has established a line of men and women's apparel called "Urban Renewal". The line is produced from recycled textiles found from a variety of sources like rag houses and is constructed in Philadelphia. New projects like "Urban Renewal" benefit retailers and permit consumers to act responsibly. The fashion industry is just now opening up to the possibilities in ethical garment production. To encourage this growth, consumers must extend their understanding of Three R's to address issues in the fashion industry.

Conclusion

Once consumers start spending consciously the result will consist of a positive feed back loop. Mark Galbraith, the product designer for the sustainable retailer Nau Inc., explains, "The more customers that buy these products, the more retailers stock them, the more suppliers increase the supply and range of styles available, which in turn makes customers more likely to buy them" (Mark Galbraith 249). As soon as consumers establish a demand for ethically produced merchandise, retailers will invest in that market. By default the fashion industry will advance into an ethical system. Kate Fletcher describes this new system as "Slow Fashion". She explains, "it is simply a different approach in which designers, buyers, retailers and consumers are more aware of the impacts of products on workers, communities and ecosystems" (Fletcher 173). Fashion's future will emphasize transparency towards the consumer, environmental

sustainability, and social ethics in addition to its profit goals. If undertaken, conscientious consumption can be the motivation for this revised industry not only improving the global implications of now but also helping sustain those in the future.

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