Fashion Marketing and the Ethical Movement Versus Individualist Consumption: Analysing the Attitude Behaviour Gap

Lynn Sudbury, Liverpool Business School, UK
Sebastian Böltner, Liverpool Business School, UK

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to analyse two current trends in the fashion market: ethical issues and throwaway fashion, and probe the attitude-behaviour gap between them. Using depth interviews with 10 young urban consumers, findings reveal a clear and large gap between positive attitudes toward ethical fashion but no actual consumption of such fashion. Consumers blamed price, affordability, and a lack of ethical fashion in mainstream markets and media, whilst the rich data revealed a detachment phenomenon where consumers shifted responsibility to third parties. Implications for marketing and consumer behaviour are presented.

INTRODUCTION
Over recent years two conflicting trends have emerged in Western culture that have influenced fashion marketing. First, the rise of an ethical movement has been observed, with issues of sustainability placed firmly on the agenda of contemporary society, and forcing a paradigm shift toward ethical and socially responsible marketing (Crane and Matten 2007). Second, a process of individualisation is taking place (Côté & Schwartz 2002; Wallace 1995; Z-Punkt 2007), amplified by phenomena such as de-traditionalisation (Heelas 1996), modernisation or post-modernisation (Inglehart 1997), globalisation (Scholte 2000), and fragmentation (Giddens 1991). Consequently, evidence of individualisation can be seen in facets of society such as flexible short-term work contracts (Doogan 2001; Sennett 1998), the end of the nuclear family (Bengston 2001; Popenoe 1988; 1993), the trend toward many and loose, instead of less and strong, relationships (Z-Punkt 2007), and the creation of micro-segments in marketing. Ethical consumption calls for ethical consciousness and an emphasis on responsibility, sustainability, and long-term benefits for future generations, while the process of individualisation supports short-term, self-expressive consumption.

Clothing and apparel are goods that can be manufactured and marketed from both perspectives: ethical fashion and organic clothing appeal to ethical awareness, whereas cheap, seasonal throwaway clothing can express individualism in the short term and be disposed of easily due to its low price. Recent academic research has investigated ethical and fast or throwaway fashion separately, and has failed to analyse these phenomena together. This research therefore fills a gap in knowledge by analysing both together. Moreover, the marketing literature pertaining to ethical consumption has identified a marked discontinuity between intentions and behaviour, noting, “there appears to be a gap between what consumers say about the importance of ethical issues and what they do at the checkout counter” (Auger and Devinney 2007, p.361). This paper therefore also investigates the attitude-behaviour gap pertaining to fashion consumption.

INDIVIDUALISATION
The phenomenon of individualisation, which is characterised by placing an emphasis on the individual in society, has been subject to academic discussion within the disciplines of sociology and anthropology for many years. Due to the impacts of late modernity or post-modernity, individualisation became “the tendency towards increasingly flexible self-awareness as the individual must make decisions and choose identities from among an increasingly complex range of options” (Wallace 1995, p.13), and can now be defined as “the extent to which people are left by their culture to their own devices in terms of meeting their own survival needs, determining the directions their lives will take, and making myriad choices along the way” (Côté and Schwartz 2002, p.573). Clearly, therefore, individualisation is a complex process and it has been analysed from different theoretical perspectives.

One perspective is Gross’ (1994) multi-optional society, which argues that society has seen a decrease in obligations and an increase in options. These changes signify an increase in personal freedom, thus enabling individuals to have more choice and more personal influence over their own lives. However, such freedom can also be perceived as personal pressure because it demands more personal decision-making and evaluation of possible consequences. Increased choice is also connected with high levels of personal risk (Beck 1992). An example of the binary relatedness of risk and choice is the issue of employment: a young person in today’s society has many more choices, including jobs, apprenticeships, or further education, than someone of the same age had 30 years ago. This freedom however also represents higher levels of perceived risk and uncertainty as jobs are not as secure and long-term-oriented as they were in the past. A logical consequence of increased variety, choice and freedom is also that individual life becomes less comparable or similar to other lives and thus more individualised. Other social developments that favour individualization include the detachment of the individual from firm social concepts in the working environment (Sennett 1998) where employers expect flexibility and mobility from employees, while offering short-term contracts instead of the lifelong-employment of earlier generations (Doogan 2001); de-traditionalisation, which describes an increased detachment of the individual from traditional social institutions such as the church or labour unions (Heelas 1996) and the encouragement of the individual to engage in more but less strong social relationships; and increases in the fragmentation (Giddens 1991) of aspects of life, such as the rise of the patchwork-family at the expense of the traditional nuclear family.

Individualisation as a Dynamic Enforcer of Consumption
Increased freedom of choice results automatically in an increased need to construct self-identity (Giddens 1991) and express individuality. Because individuality is less directed by consistent institutional and traditional guidelines, each individual must create and design his or her own self-identity (Vogt 2002). This process includes the projection of messages to others via the acquisition of goods and lifestyle practices (Dunlap et al. 2002), particularly consumer goods with high levels of self-expression (Belk 1988; Hellmann 2003; Meffert 2002). Indeed, critics argue that some people now perceive others based on their consumption decisions rather than their individual character and behaviour (Klein 2001; Quart 2003). Schulze (1992) also argues that with individualisation comes increased hedonism.

Moreover, in addition to basic and advanced demands, individuals now expect consumption goods to perform transformative functions (“transform me” or “change me”) (Bolz 2002, p.98-99), leading to society being “orientated toward continuous change and progress” (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006, p.260). Baudrillard (1998, p.100) refers to this self-imposed transformative process from a fashion perspective, noting that the cycle of fashion leads to people changing “their clothes, their belongings, their cars-on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis.”
ETHICAL ISSUES AND SUSTAINABILITY

A logical consequence of increased consumption is increased disposal of waste, packaging, and often, in today’s “throwaway society” (McCarthy 2004; Morrission 2007), intact goods for which new replacements have been purchased. The latter point is particularly true for fashion clothing. Indeed, the fashion industry is under a great deal of pressure to adjust goods and services to changing consumer needs (Frings 2002), with some leading high street retailers reaching up to 20 seasons per year (Christopher, Lowson, and Peck 2004). This process of rapid turnover in production and marketing, termed fast fashion, is not solely driven by the fashion industry, but has evolved as a response to increasing diversification of consumer demands that are “moulded by culture …what is happening on the street, in clubs, lifestyle hotspots and fashion flash points, not from a mood board or trend prediction agency 12 months in advance of a selling season” (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood 2006, p.261).

Consequently, the solid waste stream comprises more clothes and shoes than any other nondurable goods (MacEachern 2008), being responsible for 1.5-2 million tonnes of waste in the UK each year. Indeed, clothing and textiles account for 5-10% of environmental impacts (Bray 2009; DEFRA 2009).

In addition to issues of waste, and driven by globalisation, “deterriorialization” or “supraterritorialization” has occurred, relating to the situation where many production processes are now outsourced (Scholte 2000, p.46), usually to those countries that offer “the most ‘preferable’ conditions: which often means the lowest level of regulation and social provision for employees” (Crane and Matten 2007, p.299). In the highly competitive fashion and apparel market, many retailers source their manufacturing in developing countries in order to benefit from a “wage advantage” (Mattila 2002, p.340). Robins and Humphrey (2000) claim that only 1% of the final retail price for a pair of jeans manufactured in Eastern Europe was accounted for in the cost of their production, while a ski jacket produced for 51p in Bangladesh was sold for £100 in the UK.

Increasingly, such facts are widely reported in the media and there is now a greater awareness of and concern with issues such as sustainability and ethical production and trading than ever before in Western culture (Mintel 2009a). The label “Lohas” a descriptor for “lifestyles of health and sustainability,” encompasses everything from energy to fashion and was worth $230 billion by 2000 (Cortese 2003). Environmentally friendly alternatives such as using organic or biodegradable materials that are less harmful to the environment are being presented in the marketplace (Joergens 2006). The emergence of new clothing companies such as American Apparel that are based and positioned on ethical production and business processes and products, as well as the incorporation of ethical brands and products by many major retailers can be observed (Vernon 2008). Thus, there is now a choice of ethical fashion, 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” (Joergens 2006, p.361).

However, despite the fact that one third of the adult population in the UK consider themselves to be “strongly ethical” (Nicholls 2002, p.9), and the increase in spend on marketing messages that position ethical fashion as looking good and feeling responsible at the same time, total sales for ethical clothing are currently worth only 0.4% (£175 million) of the total market. Clearly, then, there is a gap between people’s attitudes and behavior. This gap is not limited to the UK, but has also been found in the US (Kilbourne and Polonsky 2005; Roberts 1996). This study aims to better understand the underlying reasons for this attitude-behavior gap within the ethical fashion market, and utilizes a framework of individualization and attitudes toward throwaway and ethical fashion to analyze results.

METHOD

In order to probe this potentially sensitive issue, and given that throwaway fashion and ethical fashion have never before been studied in relation to each other, depth interviews were employed. Participants were drawn from the UK and Germany. Both counties were used as both are examples of developed and growth societies (Baudrillard 1998; UN 2009) that have high levels of fashion consumption. According to Mintel (2009a; 2009b) young urban adults have both the highest levels of awareness of ethical fashion and the highest demand for low-cost fashion. On this basis, city-dwelling adults aged 18-28 were targeted, and, using a snowball technique, several interviewees who claimed to care about ethical issues and several who were self-proclaimed “fashion junkies” were recruited. Semi-structured interviews were designed around initial questions regarding their fashion consumption in general, before probing questions pertaining to fashion and individuality, attitudes toward throwaway and ethical fashion, and finally any gap that emerged between attitudes and behavior. During the interviews follow-up probing allowed further investigation of relevant issues. To prevent burnout or loss of interest by participants, interviews were initially designed to take no longer than 45 minutes. However, some went beyond this length of time, with the full agreement of the interviewee.

Sufficient time for critical reflection on a conducted interview and its results was allowed before the next interview was conducted, and interviews continued until the same themes emerged and no new results were being uncovered. These techniques resulted in 10 interviews being conducted over an eight week period.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Only one participant denied that she was fashion conscious. All claimed to go shopping for clothes at least once a month, and several claimed to do so three or four times per month. There were no discernable differences between German and British participants in their responses. The rest of this section analyses results around the four major headings of fashion and individuality, attitudes toward throwaway fashion, attitudes toward ethical fashion, and finally the attitude-behavior gap. The gender and age of each participant to which individual quotes belong are provided in parenthesis.

Fashion & Individuality

In terms of individuality, several participants referred to their clothes as reflecting their personality, viz:

“I’d say the clothes I wear definitely reflect my personality” (M, 26).

“I think clothes are most important when it comes to expressing my personality” (F, 25).

Additionally, it was confirmed that fashion and clothing fulfil communicative and self-expressive purposes. One respondent even stated that clothing is:

“The only non-verbal way of showing individuality to the society” (M, 27).

While others noted its importance in presenting the self in different social situations:

“It [clothing] is important in business life as well as in private life” (M, 27).
All participants but one pointed out that their choice and actual wearing of clothes reflects and communicates both their individuality and their individual lifestyle, summed up by quotes such as:

“I’d say a lot of my clothes are individual” (M, 26).

“I have a few t-shirts with band names on so that’s obviously which band I like, I’ve got customised t-shirts and things so I think they’re quite unique” (M, 26).

“For me it’s important also to express what sort of like other interests you have, for example music or the sort of you know the lifestyle things so I think it’s quite important for me to express this by my clothing” (M, 18).

“I’m not particularly girly, so the clothes that I wear reflect that” (F, 25).

Clearly, by making reference to using clothes to communicate a self-identity such as “not girly” and by wearing fashion to communicate lifestyles and interests, these interviewees confirm previous findings (Belk 1988; Mesch 2002; Hellmann 2003) that fashion and clothing serve self-expressive functions that reflect taste and interests (Featherstone 1987). Interviews then moved on to ascertain whether or not participants felt the need to constantly consume: as suggested in the literature pertaining to individualisation.

**Attitudes toward Throwaway Fashion**

Many interviewees claimed to shop even when they don’t necessarily need a new item, lending support to Baudrillard’s (1998) contention of a consumer society where consumption per se is a major force in Western cultures. Interestingly, while many denied that they did not buy things they did not need, they were knowledgeable about the concept of a throwaway society. One interviewee even mentioned the term:

“We’re living in a throwaway society; you can buy all sorts for cheap prices…and when you don’t need them anymore people throw them away. Everybody used to buy a TV and that’d be something that’d stay in families like a generation, because once mum and dad were finished…they’d put it down to their kids… It’s not like that anymore because everything is so cheap” (M, 22).

Initially, there was no support for the contention that people now change their wardrobe within a single season and feel pressured into doing so (Baudrillard 1998; Barnes & Lea-Greenwood 2006), as all denied buying things they did not need. Participants argued that when they add to their wardrobe they did not feel they were unduly replacing items. When asked whether or not they visited shops that sell cheap throwaway fashion, however, results revealed a different story:

“I mean, the thing is or the reason why I would say myself or a lot of young people choose to go shopping in these sort of shops is because they can always get really good bargains throughout the whole year. They don’t have to wait for, you know, reductions in the summer or winter” (F, 25).

“I’d go there for bargains like if I needed cheap underwear… or a top…I’d wear as one off items…it’s more about the price when I go to those shops” (M, 26).

As the interviews continued, many participants revealed further knowledge from the media of the criticisms levied at such retailers, including knowledge of such firm’s business strategies and an awareness of poor labour conditions abroad:

“Well obviously there’s quite a lot about Primark [in the media]…and their ethical stance producing in sweatshops” (M, 26).

“I know that Primark don’t really advertise anything. They’ve got that much of a profit and they make lots of their stuff in sweatshops and that, so they can get away with having cheap quality and not great quality” (M, 18).

“They’re so cheap that there is no way on earth that they can be produced by paying a normal wage to the people who produce them. I mean buying a top for like £1.50, that’s unbelievable. That’s a pint of milk” (F, 25).

There was however a broad variety of approaches to the way individuals viewed their own actual behaviour in relation to the problematic situation. One pointed out a relative high level of detachment from the unethical sourcing processes:

Q: “You mentioned child labour. So you’re basically aware of those criticisms?”

A: “Oh yeah…when you think about it like that, …you think ‘Oh that’s not great and they can get away with that’ but then it’s sort of supply and demand on the other hand, isn’t it? I’m a bit cynical about that one. It’s not right but at the end of the day it doesn’t affect me personally. I wouldn’t say I’m not bothered but there’s more important stuff to me” (M, 18).

Another respondent showed higher levels of empathy and stressed political awareness and interest in such issues, but then claimed that financial constraints make it impossible to avoid or boycott throwaway fashion systematically.

“Well, of course I’m aware [of the criticism] because I am politically interested and I am a politically interested person…and I know about the criticisms about these shops. Criticisms that the clothes are produced in third world deprived labour… yes of course I know that. I know of those things”

Q: “Is that a thing that you keep in mind when you’re doing your shopping?”

A: “Yeah I do, I’ve got these things in mind and over the past couple of years I’ve tried to avoid certain shops that are you know well known that have child labour and exploited labour in third world countries and I have tried to avoid them but it’s very difficult if you don’t have a lot of money to avoid these shops” (F, 25).

Indeed, cheap prices were mentioned time and again, with limited finances and the current recession blamed:

“Yeah, I do feel bad but in a current climate with prices as they are, it’s not really ethical to say but if I needed clothes I’d buy them as cheap as possible” (M, 26).
As these quotes demonstrate, clear evidence of ambivalence began to emerge as the interviews progressed. On the one hand, participants denied that they buy things they do not really need and then readily discard them (throwaway-society). On the other hand, when probed their answers revealed that they do view cheap clothing as one-off or throwaway. In terms of justifying their own consumer behaviour, again there were two types of responses: one type suggested that they are not personally responsible for environmental and social problems caused by this practice, the other blamed retailers for making cheap produce so easily available while making the alternative ethical fashion too expensive.

Attitudes toward Ethical Fashion

All participants had heard of the concept of ethical fashion, and revealed high levels of awareness of brands such as American Apparel and the ethical ranges of mainstream retailers. All were in favour of the concept of ethical fashion and most expressed positive attitudes toward it. However, in terms of actual consumption, cost constraints emerged time and again:

“If I can do my bit even if it’s buying some clothes that are fairly traded or made from sustainable resources then that would definitely be a motivation for me, but at my present time I can’t afford to do that” (M,26).

“…of course I have heard of these things and I would fully support these sorts of things. It’s just that I’m not in the position financially to really be consistent as a consumer and say I am only going to certain shops that I know don’t do child labour and that but I can’t be consistent out of financial reasons” (F,25).

Early in the interviews, many participants had mentioned quality to be just as important as price when purchasing fashion clothing. However, none mentioned quality in relation to ethical fashion, suggesting that either quality is taken for granted with such goods, or that price is actually a more important consideration to them. One interesting point to emerge was that respondents viewed ethical fashion as a special feature, as opposed to a real alternative to cheap fashion. The investigation also revealed a broader social perspective that went beyond price issues and into those of subculture and class:

I would say it appeals only to a certain type of person that would buy only that stuff… like a hippie (M,18).

Q: A hippie? An ethical consumer?

A: Yeah, someone who is more concerned about these things because at the minute unfortunately not everybody is (M,18).

“I think it is an upper and middle class thing to be able to, you know, consume like that. You know conscious of fair trade and conscious of you know working conditions and things like that. You know you have to be in a privileged position in order to do that” (F,25).

Indeed, in comparison to the successful rise of Fair Trade chocolate and coffee (Doherty & Tranchell 2007), many respondents felt that the opportunity to target mass markets with ethical fashion was still in its infancy:

“If you look at some of the stuff years ago Fair Trade coffee and chocolate was not a big deal but now everyone’s heard of it. Not everyone would buy it but a lot more people do buy them and if you give it a few years I imagine that could be like that with clothing” (M,18).

“A few years ago…the whole ethical concept was still quite early doors especially in the mainstream…coffee and chocolate really mainstream and in a few years I believe people will be more ethically conscious and aware. As I said it needs more high street brand to push it [ethical fashion] along” (M,26).

When asked whether fmcgs such as coffee and chocolate had been more successful due to their low prices, one respondent remarked:

“If you look at normal coffee and fair trade coffee and normal clothes and ethical clothes…you are paying a bit more but it’s not that much more. If you look at clothes but you pay more for clothes anyways compared to coffee so it probably just seems to be more expensive” (M,26).

Attitude-behaviour Gap

As expected, when the interviews turned to the gap between the positive attitudes that most expressed, and actual purchase behaviour, price and financial restraints emerged again:

“If I can do my bit even if it’s buying some clothes that are fairly traded or made from sustainable resources then it would definitely be a motivation for me, but at my present time I can’t afford to do that” (M,26).

“I like the idea of ethical clothing but then I did reconsider and I just couldn’t afford it” (F,25).

Comparative perceived value was also an issue:

“The way I would think is: ‘well for the type of this t-shirt which is made of cotton, I could get three t-shirts that are also made of cotton they are not ethically sourced but they are also made of cotton.’ So I would go to the cheaper alternative” (F,25).

An element of scepticism also emerged, with one interviewee commenting:

“They [ethical/sustainable fashion items] are good if they are for real” (M,27),

suggesting that some consumers have noted the recent press regarding green washing (Kärnä et al 2003) or clean washing (Low & Davenport 2005), which are terms used to describe the unfounded use of environmental marketing practices. However, perhaps the most noteworthy finding was that, when probed, interviewees revealed that, contrary to their earlier claims that ethical purchasing is important, they don’t actually care enough about these issues:

Q: “So you’re aware of it but when it actually comes to shopping you don’t really think about it then?”

A: “No” (M,26).

Q: “Have you ever thought about doing it [buying ethical]?”

A: “No... I don’t think about that” (M,18).
“If you look at sweatshops it is not really harming anyone, it is in a way but it doesn’t affect anyone directly so I think the main consumers won’t really push it” (M, 26).

“Ah well if you think like child labour that’s the worst possible thing but like 100 years ago it was pretty much common place in England. These countries Indonesia, India, China… they’re still developing and they’re going through their sort of industrial revolution and maybe in 100 years they will be as developed as us now. I see it sort of like them going through their industrial awakening and revolution in the same way that Britain did” (M, 18).

“I don’t want to disillusion anybody but I don’t think that it’s just, well, in general it’s not going to work cos I think as long as there are more substantial problems people won’t really care about ethical clothing” (F, 25).

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The lack of consumption of ethical fashion items revealed in this study supports previous findings that younger people, despite having the highest levels of awareness of ethical fashion (Mintel 2009a), have been found to consume fewer ethical products than older consumers (Trendbüro 2009). It was clear that these young urban consumers still view fashion from the dominant price-quality continuum (Ulrich and Sarasin 1995) and are yet to perceive ethical clothing as a viable alternative to cheap throwaway fashion. Also, a clear attitude-behaviour gap emerged, where participants demonstrated positive attitudes toward ethical fashion, but failed to consume it. This gap, while never before identified with fashion items, is widely acknowledged for other ethical products (Boulstridge and Carrigan 2000; Roberts 1996; Simon 1995). This so-called attitude behaviour gap was expected, and a major aim of this study was to analyse it in depth. From a theoretical perspective, it is argued here that individualisation was indeed influential in maintaining that gap. A growing and powerful emphasis on the individual and increasing importance on the design and expression of self-identity (Giddens 1991; Hitzler and Honer 1994) has perhaps put pressure on individuals to place greater importance on the consumption of cheap fashion—which allows for more choice—at the expense of fewer ethically produced items. Perhaps participants in this study have been enucleated into the ideology of consumption, believing that “the more we have, the better off we are” (Kilbourne and Polonsky 2005, p.39).

At the same time, the emphasis on the individual at the expense of collectivism became evident through the levels of detachment from ethical and environmental issues demonstrated by the majority of participants. Thus a clear paradox was identified. These young urban consumers openly criticised fast fashion business practices and yet, when probed, revealed that they do not feel responsible for these practices. From an interpretative point of view this detaching process was underlined by respondents’ tendencies to reply in the third person. Even after being explicitly addressed (“Would you buy them?”) some replied with general answers (“I think people do…”). Consequently, participants shifted responsibility towards third parties, blaming governments, retailers, marketers, the media, and even the levels of development in various countries. There were also a range of practical reasons put forward for the lack of ethical clothing consumption: not least financial. Respondents either stated that ethical fashion is not affordable to them, or that it is relatively too expensive in comparison to alternatives.

From a managerial point of view, the question remains as to whether a significant increase in the consumption levels of more responsible and sustainable fashion among young urban consumers is achievable. Although attitudes toward such fashion are positive, once probed the lack of real concern over sustainability issues means the task of marketing ethical fashion has a steep road ahead. Unless the retail price of ethical clothing can be reduced, the availability of high street ranges increased, and perhaps most importantly and most difficult, the links between the consumption of cheap fashion and current social and environmental problems can be driven home in a convincing way, then ethical fashion may remain a niche market for many years to come.

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