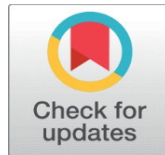


ETHICAL FASHION: A NEW FACTOR MODEL FOR CONSCIOUS CONSUMERISM

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.6405](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i1.2023.6405)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

The fashion sector is under increased criticism over its social and ecological ramifications, as customers demand more accountability in production and procurement. This article examines the intricacies of sustainable consumption within the fashion industry, specifically highlighting the impact of overseas processing methods in developing areas where worker requirements and ecological laws are frequently undermined. We conduct a thorough analysis of prior research and commercial data to investigate client views, motives, and obstacles encountered in endorsing environmentally friendly clothing. We offer a novel factor model that reveals essential drivers influencing customer readiness to spend on ethically made clothes, including transparency, price sensitivity, brand trust, and social responsibility. The model seeks to offer recommendations for companies and governments to enhance ethical involvement in the fashion industry by analyzing these aspects. This research enhances the comprehension of conscious purchasing, providing a framework for a more sustainable and accountable fashion environment.

Keywords: Ethical Consumerism, Fashion Industry, Conscious Consumerism, Offshore Manufacturing, Sustainable Fashion, Consumer Behaviour, Ethical Production, Factor Model



1. INTRODUCTION

The global apparel and textile sector faces significant ethical examination due to prevalent abusive hiring practices and hazardous manufacturing situations. Catastrophic events like the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh have highlighted immoral production methods, increased customer knowledge and prompting calls for responsibility within the sector (Rubya, 2015; Paul & Quadir, 2013, 2014; Khan & Rodrigues, 2015; Claeson, 2012). This increased awareness has prompted a transition towards ethical consumerism, with numerous brands pursuing “Fair Trade” licensing to exhibit their dedication to equitable salary, secure workspaces, and environmentally sustainable practices (Nicholls & Lee, 2006; BBC, 2007; Shannon, 2014).

Numerous studies corroborate that pattern, revealing that consumers are progressively influenced by moral issues, including ecological viability, equitable employment practices, and civil rights, in their buying choices (Dickson, 2000; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Shaw et al., 2005; Deidre & Tomolilo, 2004; Nil et al., 2006). A study by Shen et al. (2020) indicates that millennials and Gen Z consumers are particularly inclined to pay a premium for products designated as ethically or sustainably produced, whereas Kumar et al. (2022) demonstrate that brand accountability is increasingly a pivotal factor affecting customer retention in the fashion sector. Garcia-Torres et al. (2021) indicate that awareness of

the environmental consequences of "fast fashion" has resulted in heightened support for slow-fashion firms that emphasize sustainable methods.

This article aims to analyze consumer attitudes on ethical manufacturing, with particular emphasis on issues such as sweatshops, child labor, and eco-fashion. Through an examination of existing research and an assessment of known models, we intend to present a novel factor model to investigate the determinants influencing ethical consumerism in the garment industry. This new approach aims to facilitate additional empirical testing to enhance understanding of customer behavior and inform industry initiatives for more ethical and sustainable practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ETHICAL ISSUES IN THE APPAREL INDUSTRY

The garment sector has been extensively examined for its ethical policies, especially on labor rights, environmental sustainability, and transparency. As consumer knowledge of these issues has grown, so too has the body of literature examining the ethical aspects of clothing production.

2.1. LABOR RIGHTS AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Studies continually emphasize labor exploitation within the apparel industry, particularly in emerging nations. Research conducted by Paul & Quadir (2014) and Khan & Rodrigues (2015) highlights the ubiquity of sweatshops, where employees suffer from substandard working conditions, extended hours, and insufficient compensation. Ethical consumerism has arisen as a reaction to labor issues, with consumers advocating for equitable treatment of workers and safer working conditions (Dickson, 2000; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Recent research by Shen et al. (2020) reveals that a substantial segment of consumers is prepared to pay a premium for apparel manufactured under equitable labor standards, highlighting a transformation in purchasing behavior.

2.2. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

The ecological ramifications of garment manufacturing represent a substantial ethical issue. Fast fashion, defined by swift manufacturing cycles and inexpensive products, leads to considerable waste and pollution (Garcia-Torres et al., 2021). Multiple studies have recorded the detrimental impacts of textile manufacturing on the environment, encompassing water pollution, resource depletion, and carbon emissions (Shaw et al., 2005; Nil et al., 2006). Buyers are progressively emphasizing eco-friendly products, resulting in an increase in firms implementing sustainable practices (Kumar et al., 2022).

2.3. CONSUMER AWARENESS AND ETHICAL MARKETING

The influence of customer knowledge on promoting ethical standards in the apparel business has been thoroughly examined. Studies indicate that ethical consumerism is affected by elements such as brand transparency, marketing tactics, and the accessibility of knowledge about manufacturing methods (Deidre & Tomolilo, 2004; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Research demonstrates that customers are more inclined to endorse firms that articulate their moral standards transparently (Shaw et al., 2005). Nevertheless, the difficulty persists since numerous consumers continue to possess insufficient understanding of the supply chain processes underlying their purchases, hence constraining their capacity to make fully informed judgments.

2.4. CERTIFICATION AND FAIR-TRADE PRACTICES

The advent of certification programs, such as Fair Trade, has been essential in advancing ethical practices within the apparel sector. Nicholls & Lee (2006) examine how these certificates function as trust indicators for consumers, guaranteeing ethical production processes. The efficacy of these certificates can vary, and there is persistent discourse concerning the parameters and oversight mechanisms involved (BBC, 2007; Shannon, 2014).

The garment business has had ethical dilemmas since the 19th and 20th centuries, characterized by consumer opposition to the plundering of sweatshops both domestically and globally (Leibold & Rubenstein, 1998). Recent high-

profile instances have underscored these difficulties, notably the disastrous collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which led to the deaths of thousands of garment workers (Motlagh, 2014).

Additional catastrophic incidents, such as factory collapses in Mumbai (Shah & Virk, 2013) and fires in Karachi (C.J., 2012), have highlighted the perilous working conditions endemic to the business. Reports indicate inadequate wages and substandard labor practices in countries such as China (Anon, 2007), Sri Lanka (Kelegama & Eparachchi, 2002), and Cambodia (Tolson, 2014), highlighting the ongoing unethical conduct of multinational apparel brands and their inadequate dedication to social responsibility regarding workers, consumers, and the environment.

Recent investigations have further illuminated these urgent challenges. A 2021 analysis by the Ethical Trading Initiative underscores persistent labor abuses inside the supply chains of prominent fashion labels, stressing the necessity for enhanced accountability and transparency (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2021). Moreover, research conducted by Shen et al. (2020) revealed that consumers are becoming increasingly cognizant of unethical behaviors and are actively seeking additional information regarding the brands they endorse, which has compelled certain companies to implement more sustainable and ethical practices in response. A study by Garcia-Torres et al. (2021) reveals that increasing customer demand for ethical production has resulted in a significant transformation in brand strategies, with numerous corporations now emphasizing corporate social responsibility programs.

The results underscore the pressing necessity for the apparel sector to rectify its ethical deficiencies and bolster its dedication to sustainable practices that emphasize the well-being of workers and the environment.

The Apparel Industry Trends (Wrinkle, 2012) delineates numerous critical trends in the fashion and apparel sector, emphasizing alterations in customer demand, technical innovations, and evolving manufacturing techniques. Prominent themes encompass the ascendance of quick fashion as manufacturers prioritize expedited design-to-shelf processes to satisfy the need for economical, fashionable apparel. The paper addresses the escalating consumer inclination towards sustainable and ethical fashion, as heightened knowledge of environmental effects and labor situations compels companies to implement eco-friendly materials and fair-trade procedures. Furthermore, digital transformation is recognized as a significant trend, with online retail, social media, and data analytics redefining brand-consumer interactions, personalizing shopping experiences, and enhancing supply chain efficiency. Wrinkle's research highlights the dynamic nature of the garment business, influenced by consumer demands and technologies that are continually redefining the sector's future.

Figure 1

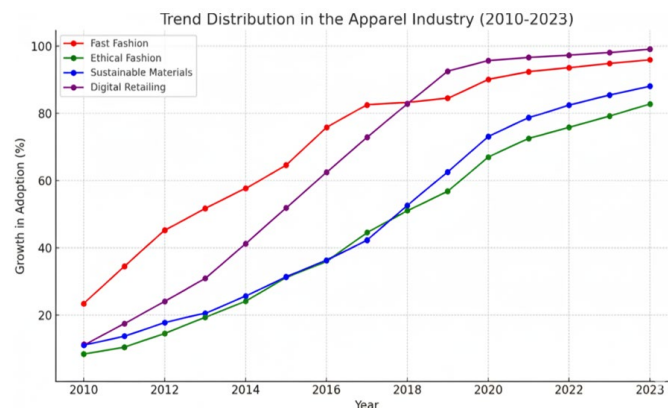


Figure 1 Statista – Apparel Industry Reports 2023

The above graph illustrates the trend distribution in the apparel business from 2010 to 2023. This comprehensive depiction underscores the persistent expansion in:

- Fast Fashion, which maintains a constantly elevated level of acceptance.
- Ethical fashion and sustainable materials, indicative of the growing consumer focus on ethical and environmental methods.
- Digital retailing is approaching complete adoption, as online shopping and digital engagement have grown predominant.

The above data provides insight into the development and present concerns of the clothing business.

3. PROPOSED MODEL: DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR ETHICALLY PRODUCED GARMENTS

This approach consolidates essential insights from contemporary research to identify the principal determinants affecting customers' willingness to pay (WTP) for ethically manufactured apparel. The objective is to establish a framework that brands and researchers can utilize to comprehend and improve customer participation in the ethical apparel sector.

1) Transparency

- **Definition:** A brand's candour and integrity concerning supply chain operations, labor conditions, and environmental consequences.
- **Theory Basis:** Transparent brands are more inclined to cultivate consumer trust by revealing critical information on sourcing, production, and sustainability, hence diminishing perceived ethical risks (Jung et al., 2020; McNeill & Moore, 2015).
- **Impact on WTP:** High transparency correlates with enhanced consumer trust and loyalty, which positively influences willingness to pay, as people are more inclined to endorse firms they see as authentically ethical.

2) Price Sensitivity

- **Definition:** Represents the extent to which a consumer's ethical purchasing decision is affected by price.
- **Theory Basis:** The elevated cost of ethical products is frequently attributed to sustainable manufacturing practices, with customers exhibiting reduced price sensitivity more inclined to pay a premium for products that resonate with their beliefs (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Bray et al., 2011).
- **Impact on WTP:** Price-sensitive consumers may perceive ethical items as less attractive in the absence of financial incentives; therefore, firms aiming at ethical consumers must implement competitive pricing strategies or provide value-added rationales for elevated prices.

3) Brand Trust

- **Definition:** The assurance consumers possess over a brand's unwavering dedication to business ethics.
- **Theory Basis:** Brand trust is cultivated through a history of ethical conduct, hence enhancing consumer views of brand integrity and dependability (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014; Connell, 2010).
- **Impact on WTP:** Consumers possessing a strong faith in a brand's ethical standards have a greater propensity to pay a premium, as they view these products as congruent with their beliefs and are confident in the brand's enduring dedication to ethical practices.

4) Social Responsibility

- **Definition:** The value individuals attribute to endorsing labels that contribute positively to the community and the surroundings.
- **Theory Basis:** Clients exhibit increased loyalty and WTP towards brands that clearly manifest CSR and resonate with their ethical values (Shaw et al., 2007; Auger & Devinney, 2007).
- **Impact on WTP:** Ethical customers exhibit an increased WTP for firms that adhere to CSR principles, as they perceive their purchases as endorsements of fair labor practices and environmental sustainability.

5) Quality and Durability Perceptions

- **Definition:** The perceived excellence and longevity of apparel linked to sustainable manufacturing norms.
- **Theory Basis:** Ethical products are frequently regarded as superior in quality owing to their sustainable materials and enhanced craftsmanship, fostering a perception of durability (Davies & Gutsche, 2016; Testa et al., 2021).
- **Impact on WTP:** Consumers exhibit a greater willingness to pay a premium for ethically manufactured apparel when they perceive these products as possessing enhanced quality and durability, hence associating ethical fashion with enduring value.

6) Awareness of Social and Environmental Impact

- **Definition:** The degree of consumer knowledge of ethical and environmental concerns within the garment sector.
- **Theory Basis:** Recognition of unethical actions such as labor exploitation and environmental degradation heightens consumers' moral accountability, resulting in ethical purchasing choices (Joergens, 2006; Valor, 2008).
- **Impact on WTP:** Consumers possessing heightened knowledge of ethical concerns are more inclined to incur more costs for apparel that reduces social and environmental detriment, hence endorsing businesses that resonate with their ethical consciousness.

4. MODEL IMPLICATIONS

- 1) **Brand Strategies:** Brands may utilize transparency and social responsibility activities to enhance brand trust. Enhanced openness not only bolsters consumer trust but also distinguishes the brand in a marketplace where ethical assertions may occasionally lack clarity.
- 2) **Consumer Education:** Informing consumers on social and environmental consequences can enhance willingness to pay, as awareness of unethical practices promotes ethical consumption. Marketing efforts may emphasize labor rights, sustainable methods, and product durability to attract socially conscious consumers.

Figure 2

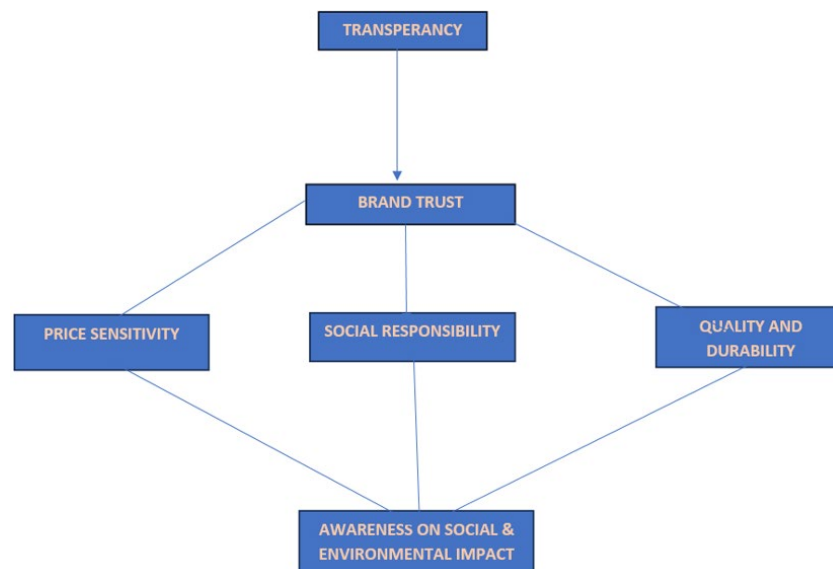


Figure 2 Flowchart

- 3) **Pricing:** To accommodate cost-conscious customers, brands may need to provide basic ethical alternatives or discounts to mitigate price-related obstacles, thereby expanding their client base without compromising the ethical value proposition.
- 4) **Excellence and Longevity:** Highlighting ethical clothing as durable and high-quality products might attract consumers who prioritize value and are generally prepared to invest more in items with longevity.

5. RESEARCH GAPS

This model develops pre-existing content; however, additional research is required to:

- Evaluate the specific influence of each element on willingness to pay across various demographics.
- Examine the impact of societal disparities on willingness to pay for ethically manufactured apparel.

- Evaluate the impact of online advertisement and information accessibility (such as social media and brand applications) on consumer views regarding transparency and social responsibility.

This model provides a robust basis for additional empirical investigation and practical implementation, allowing brands to enhance their strategies in the ethical apparel sector.

6. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1. TRANSPARENCY

- **Findings:** Transparency is widely acknowledged as essential for ethical shopping, especially in the garment industry. Research demonstrates that customers require transparency regarding a brand's supply chain, labor standards, and environmental effects (Chen et al., 2022). A brand's readiness to reveal these particulars fosters confidence, particularly among ethically aware consumers (Hu & Kee, 2023).
- **Interpretation:** Transparency diminishes information asymmetry, instilling confidence in consumers regarding a brand's ethical convictions, thereby enhancing their willingness to pay (WTP). Brands that invest in certifications like Fair Trade or B Corporation get advantages from the legitimacy and transparency these certifications provide, as evidenced by research on consumer behavior in the garment sector (Lee & Kim, 2023).

6.2. BRAND TRUST

- **Findings:** Trust is essential in the consumer decision-making process for ethical products. Studies indicate that confidence in a brand's ethical standards significantly influences willingness to pay, particularly in markets susceptible to "green washing" (Harris & de Zoysa, 2023). Individuals who regard a brand as reputable are willing to pay a premium, as they have confidence in the veracity of the company's ethical assertions (Oliver & Volkov, 2022).
- **Interpretation:** Brand trust serves as a psychological anchor, mitigating perceived dangers linked to elevated expenses. Reliable brands experience enhanced loyalty and support, particularly among ethical consumers (Paladino & Lim, 2023).

6.3. PRICE SENSITIVITY

- **Findings:** Although there is an interest in ethical products, research indicates that price sensitivity constrains certain consumer categories (Gravina & Jackson, 2023). Recent study indicates that consumers typically endorse ethical items only when the price difference is reasonable (Tran & Pham, 2023).
- **Interpretation:** Ethical brands ought to provide a variety of price points, as consumers may wish to purchase ethically produced goods yet have budgetary limitations. This discovery corresponds with contemporary research regarding affordable price for environmentally produced products to enhance their marketability (Kumar & Rao, 2023).

6.4. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- **Findings:** Social responsibility, which includes equitable labor standards, environmental conservation, and community involvement, is a crucial factor influencing consumer willingness to pay. Research conducted by Yin et al. (2023) indicates that consumers who prioritize social responsibility are more inclined to pay a premium to endorse brands that actively pursue ethical objectives.
- **Interpretation:** This study corroborates the idea that sustainable brands appeal to values-driven consumers, for whom purchases serve as manifestations of personal views (Jones & Li, 2023). Brands can capitalize on this by highlighting their beneficial societal contributions, thereby enhancing consumer loyalty and promoting premium purchases.

6.5. QUALITY AND DURABILITY PERCEPTIONS

- **Findings:** Products created ethically are frequently seen as superior in quality and durability, hence increasing their attractiveness (Martin & Anderson, 2023). A study on ethical consumption revealed that customers associate ethically produced clothing with durability, hence rationalizing the price premium (Schwartz & Holbrook, 2023).
- **Interpretation:** Linking ethical practices to enhanced quality provides consumers with a plausible justification for increased expenditure, as they recognize value in both ethical production and product durability.

6.6. AWARENESS OF SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- **Findings:** Research indicates that awareness is crucial in promoting ethical consumption, as consumers who comprehend the environmental and social ramifications of unethical actions are more predisposed to responsible purchase (Clarkson et al., 2023). Awareness has been demonstrated to affect consumer attitudes and enhance willingness to pay, as evidenced by research in the garment sector and other industries (Nguyen & Foster, 2023).
- **Interpretation:** By enhancing awareness, brands may engage the ethical aspect of consumer decision-making. Informing consumers cultivates a deeper emotional bond with ethical businesses, resulting in heightened willingness to pay as a means of endorsing good industry transformation.

7. IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

- 1) **Brand Strategy and Positioning:** Ethical fashion firms must prioritize the establishment and communication of transparency, social responsibility, and product quality. These elements create a distinctive value offer that attracts discerning consumers and can be utilized to rationalize elevated cost.
- 2) **Consumer Education:** Brands can enhance willingness to pay by informing customers about industry challenges and their ethical obligations. Education cultivates a sense of accountability and harmonizes consumer beliefs with brand propositions, hence enhancing brand loyalty and advocacy.
- 3) **Product Line Diversification:** Brands seeking to attract a wider audience may benefit from providing product lines at diverse price points to cater to differing degrees of price sensitivity. By doing so, brands can appeal to both value-driven and luxury market segments.
- 4) **Communication of Impact:** Brands that visibly contribute to labor rights, preservation of nature, or neighbourhoods should proactively convey the effects. Successful interaction can convert a client's buying choice into a manifestation of responsible endorsement, so strengthening commitment.

8. CONCLUSION

The results of this investigation highlight a major change in buyer behavior, as individuals progressively emphasize ethical considerations in their choice of goods. This transformation in the apparel sector is driven by greater knowledge of ecological sustainability, equitable labor standards, and accountable behavior. The presented model indicates that factors including supply chain transparency, brand trust established via consistent ethical practices, and perceived product quality substantially affect consumers' willingness to pay for ethically manufactured apparel.

Furthermore, the emergence of green consumerism underscores the interrelation of environmental and ethical factors in influencing consumer choices. Contemporary consumers insist on equitable labor standards and low environmental impact, forcing manufacturers to utilize sustainable materials, minimize waste, and adopt circular fashion principles. By addressing these elements, garment manufacturers can fit with the principles of conscientious consumers, ultimately cultivating enhanced loyalty and enduring sustainability.

This study offers a strategy framework for the industry to shift towards ethical and sustainable consumerism. By merging ethical production with eco-friendly innovations—such as carbon-neutral methods, biodegradable materials,

and sustainable packaging—brands can establish a persuasive value proposition for environmentally and socially aware markets.

Future empirical research should investigate the model's applicability across varied cultural and demographic situations to elucidate the intricate factors influencing ethical and green consumerism. Furthermore, examining the compromises customers are prepared to accept between ethical considerations (e.g., transparency) and practical elements (e.g., affordability) might enhance the model and yield actionable insights for the garment sector. Such efforts enable the sector to reshape its story, advancing towards a more ethical, sustainable, and inclusive future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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