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Your clothes are beautiful but are your ethics?

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1.0 Introduction

People love to wear beautiful clothes that suit their personality, charm and elegance. But people hardly think about the way these clothes are made and under what circumstances and conditions the workers make these clothes. In this context, an ethical consumer is an individual who intends to purchase clothes that are manufactured ethically; the workers are treated fairly, work under sustainable environment without any labor exploitation. An ethical consumer tends to boycott the particular clothing brands that are not manufactured ethically and the brand is known for labour exploitation. Weller (2007, pp. 67-86) highlights that ethical consumption relates to consuming products that are manufactured or produced without violating the principles of human rights, animal well being, labor conditions, environment protection and preservation of natural resources. Tallontire *et al.*(2001) put forward that ethical consumerism includes either one, or all of the following aspects namely, purchasing ethically made products, boycotting specific brands following unethical trade/labour practices, and using activism as an indication of representing one's belief.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the research is to explore to what extent the consumers question the unethical manufacturing of clothes, particularly in Australia. Within the arena of ethical consumerism, consumer awareness about fair trade will also be explored. The study also intends to investigate whether consumers express their concern over unethical manufacturing by avoiding buying clothes from brands involved in unethical practices. Ethical consumption is a very broad topic and this study concentrates on ethical buying in terms of restricting the purchase to 'sweat free clothing' so that consumer familiarity about sweat-shops and outworkers can be investigated. The research will focus on the Australian consumers as ethical garments manufacturing is a major concern in Australia, while labor and resource exploitation is a global issue.

1.2 Research rationale

The urge to make quick profits, control costs and lead the fierce competition instigate many clothing brands, either intentionally or unintentionally violate the norms of ethical business practices (Wells, 2009, pp. 567-579). Although, an organization's CSR (Corporate social responsibilities) makes it necessary to manufacture clothes without labour exploitation, avoiding child labor, resource preservation, fair trade, and sustainable working conditions, many clothing brands are known to engage in such unfair business practices. Lack of consumer awareness and concern about the same add to the misery and it becomes difficult to curtail such unethical practices (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Hence concerns such as labor law violations on maximum working hours, unfair treatment, vulnerable exposure to harmful chemicals, verbal and physical abuse of workers, are not controlled.

The findings of this research, obtained from a combination of primary and secondary research techniques will help to spread consumer awareness about ethical consumerism. This research will also contribute to changing the consumer perceptions regarding buying clothes just because they are good to wear and beautiful to look at.

1.3 Background of the study

In case of clothes manufacture, the ethical issues involved in the chain of production is questionable at many levels, particularly when it comes to buying or procuring the raw materials from people in developing countries. Despite the presence of domestic and international human rights agreements several countries have failed to protect their workers' rights, and often support their exploitation (Paulins & Hillery, 2009). As discussed in the purpose of the study, this research stresses on ethical consumption in Australia, the attempt will be to explore how far young Australian women have knowledge and understanding of ethically made fashion products. The study will also explore if they are interested in ethical buying trends and have a tendency to change.

In the sweat shops, millions of workers who work are mostly composed of women, and children working for more than 60-70 hours a week without being paid for overtime (Engler, 2006, pp.14-16). Sweat shops are also engaged in human trafficking where women and children are literally

bought and sold to cloth merchants. For instance, women from Thailand are exploited to Japan as a means of cheap labour that often involves forced labour, debt bondage, and poverty.

1.4 Research aim and objectives

1.4.1 Aim

The aim of the research is to explore whether consumers are aware of ethical clothes manufacturing and if they tend to boycott clothes of those brands that are unethically made. The aim is also to conceptualize why young women, particularly those having a tendency to spend money and time on fashion, buy clothes that are made through the process of human exploitation, such as in sweat shops

1.4.2 Research Objectives:

- 1.To understand the concept of ethical consumerism and its various dimensions
- 2.To evaluate the awareness and perceptions of Australian women about ethical consumerism
- 3.To critically appraise why young women purchase clothes, despite being aware of unethical/unfair trade practices
4. To investigate whether such women tend to boycott the buying of beautiful clothes made in sweat shops

1.4.3 Research questions

- 1.Do women still buy clothes despite being aware of such unethical practices? What is the reason behind this?

1.5 Outline of the study

The first chapter deals with introducing the topic to the readers followed by discussing the purpose of the study, research rationale, and background of the research. The aim, objectives and research questions are highlighted to guide the future course of action.

The second chapter will deal with a critical evaluation of the concepts and theories relating to the research study. Theoretical gaps existing in the current literature are identified and further research carried out to fill up the gaps and cover the areas not researched earlier.

The third chapter will outline the methodology undertaken to conduct the entire research in a systematic manner. The appropriate selection of research philosophy, research approach, design, data collection methods and sampling techniques will be explained with justification for relevant choices.

The fourth chapter will deal with findings and analysis of the data obtained through primary research in context of the research aim, objectives and literature review. Data will be extensively presented and explained with the help of analytical techniques to resolve the research problems.

The fifth and the last chapter will summarize the entire content and attempt to explain the results of the research. The objectives established in the first chapter will be linked with the conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.0 Overview of the current literature

Extensive research in the field of ethical consumerism has been carried out in the past, but mainly for marketing purposes. These studies have generally focused on the trends of ethical consumer purchases or the tendency to avoid buying certain goods produced unethically. However, these studies have mainly focused on identifying the trends of consumers who mark themselves as being already ethically aware of goods produced unethically. Past research also stress on consumers who tend to prioritize factors that are considered to be more important than ethical consumerism while shopping. Research also highlights that a huge gap lies between ethical thinking and when it comes to practicing ethical consumerism (Keane, 1996, pp. 38-39).

In light of the above discussion, the current literature attempts to link the knowledge related to the miserable condition of exploited workers with the familiarity of the general public and women's perceptions about ethical consumerism. Ethical consumption relating to fashion wear will also be connected to the underpinning issues of worker exploitation.

2.1 Ethical dimensions in the purchase of clothing

Baffes (2003) opines that the consumer interest in the environmental, social and ethical issues has been continuously growing. Such ethical considerations are having a profound impact on the pattern of consumption decision taken by the consumers. However, Paulins & Hillery (2009) argue that despite the existence of widespread acquaintance and knowledge about the importance of ethical issues in the manufacture of garments, these issues do not tend to play a major role when it comes to the consumer's decision to choose clothing items. The product characteristics such as quality, design, colour, style and attractiveness dominate the consumer decision to buy or reject clothing. Adding to these views, Wells (2009, pp. 567-579) adds that the most significant decision to purchase apparels is 'fashion' and 'comfort'. Supporting this, Groves (2005, pp.75) puts forward that the extent of social and personal aspects that consumers consider while purchasing fashion products signify that ethical considerations are quite forgotten.

Research conducted by Weller (2007, pp. 67-86) suggests that ethical consumption is more a 'topic of discussion' rather than being practiced in the real world. Their research claims that human right record about the country of origin of particular clothing is considered to be less significant than the fashion and quality of the garments purchase.

2.2 Social thought on ethical consumption

Consumption is assumed to be a culture related ideology and culture is said to dictate our need for consumption (Bocock *et al.* 2010). In the fast paced time and money constrained consumption, and the profusion of individual and social elements of fashion, the scope for ethical consumption, hardly seem to exist (Tallontire *et al.* 2001). Consumers who consider ethics exhibit the cognitive dissonance between their need for consuming fashion that makes them look beautiful and the thought of being ethical.

Modern culture and consumption habits demand the quick availability of goods, at cheap prices and convenient access. Groves (2005, pp.75) puts forward that the traditional considerations of consumers prevail over the significance of ethical buying. The cultural magnitude of fashion signifies that the consumers are flooded with priorities and choices while purchasing, both in the individual and social context. Abundant choices and excitement of shopping provides very little time to consider about sweat shop labour (Paulins & Hillery, 2009).

2.3 Ethical decision making theory

The consumer decision making model designed by Blackwell, Miniard and Engel describe that consumers undergo through six key stages in the decision making process relating to consumption of a good or a service. These stages include, recognition of need, search for information, and evaluation of alternatives pre purchase, actual purchase, and consumption followed by post consumption evaluation. This process is impinged by a wide range of internal and external factors, and ethical consumption is one of such factor.

If a consumer strictly follows ethical consumerism then the ethical purchase decision making model will include of the following steps --



Figure 1: key stages involved in the Ethical decision making process

(Source: Created by author from theoretical studies)

This model focuses mainly on the ethical elements involved in the decision making process for consumption. It does not eagerly hold a decision setting where the ethicality of a decision is secondary to other important aspects involved in the normal decision making process. This model of ethical decision making is solely dependent on the individual perceiving an ethical issue.

3. Research Methodology

3.0 Overview

The current section deals with appropriate methodology and the choice of appropriate research methods to resolve the identified research problems by answering the research questions. Creswell (2003) opines that an exploratory based social research carried out with a combination of relevant research philosophy, approach, design, data collection method and analysis is essential to obtain objective based outcome.

3.1 Exploratory study

The current study is exploratory in nature and is supposed to be carried out in the social context. Foddy (1993,pp. 11-188) opines that exploratory studies, in social science are linked to the belief of exploration where the researcher is the actual explorer. Exploration is considered to be a state of mind, perception and a particular individual orientation towards the research theme.

3.2 Research approach

3.2.1 Qualitative based interviews:

The process used for data collection will be qualitative in nature with the help of interviews. The questions of the interview will focus on the trends in the knowledge of the garment consumers participating in the research. The researcher has chosen a two layered approach to the investigation through interview that will help to prepare, both, the explorer (researcher) and the explored (participants) for the collection of data.

Ist stage

The data collection process will involve two stages. In the initial stage questionnaire will be distributed to the selected sample that will include questions focusing on their individual purchasing habits and basic about ethical knowledge. The feedback will help to design further questions for a semi structured interview in the second stage.

2nd stage

The second stage will involve semi structured interview in order to explore deep into the participants' knowledge, concerns, perceptions and concerns about buying clothes that are made with ethical practices. Saunders *et al.* (2009) explain that interview process yields rich and in-depth information that reflect the emotions and experience of the research subjects. The participants are able to connect the research problems with their real life events, experience, examples and perceptions while interacting with the facilitator (researcher).

Communicating face to face with the participants will help to stress on questions such as –

1. What do you think about being ethical while shopping?
2. What is your idea about sweat shops and ethical fashion?
3. Do you seek ethical options while making a choice about apparels brands?
4. How do you feel about labour exploitation, human trafficking and other unethical practices in clothes manufacturing process?
5. What are the constraints to ethical consumerism?

3.3 Sampling and recruitment of research subjects (participants)

A retail garments store in Melbourne, Australia will be approached for recruiting the participants for data collection. The target population will be young women who will be chosen for filling up the questionnaire in the 1st stage. This will also provide physical access to the respondents who will also be chosen for interview in the second stage.

Sampling process followed will be non probability, purposive sampling as the purpose is to seek information of a specific demographic profile, i.e. young women. Toloie-Eshlaghy *et al.* (2011, pp. 106-152) opine that non probability sampling involves non random selection of individuals where the chosen sample better represents the entire population under study.

In the 1st stage the target is to get the questionnaire filled by at least 40-50 individuals at the retail store. A small sample of 8-10 respondents, willing to participate in the semi structured interviews will be selected for the 2nd stage.

3.4 Data analysis

Data obtained from the questionnaire will be diagrammatically presented with the help of tables and charts during the data analysis process. Qualitative data obtained from the semi structured interview will be thoroughly interpreted, checked and compared with the literature discussed earlier in this research. The key findings from the primary research will be aligned with the main research objectives and questions in order to resolve the research problems.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Conducting research on a sensitive topic such as 'ethical consumerism' has to be done with full compliance, integrity and honesty. None of the respondents will be coerced to participate in the primary research and their full consent will be taken in advance. No questions will be raised on their purchase behavior, habits and perceptions about the research topic. Full compliance with the principles of the DPA (Data Protection Act) will be ensured and names of the participants will be kept anonymous. Data will only be used for academic purposes and will be used for commercial use.

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