

## **Ethical Fashion Brands: Promotion approach or a real value?**

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### **Abstract**

Ethical fashion appears as a conscious consumption movement in the 90's. It covers product offers and styles increasingly diverse. This movement has become a sustainable brand strategy, and so the number of ethical brands grew significantly in recent years, as well as their turnover.

Consumers find in ethical brands a set of values that fulfill not only their need for style but also give the opportunity, through consumption, to contribute to environmental preservation, to the improvement of working conditions and better of quality of life in their countries and in less developed countries.

Alternative marketing plays a key role in creating the market image of ethical fashion brands, by assuring transparency and clarity of messages, credibility and continuity, so that their differentiation factors can be step by step assimilated and understood by consumers.

The study of a set of ethical fashion brands allowed to observe that these usually at the stage of market entry tend towards opting to offer a specific value, communicated clearly. Progressively, the elements of brand differentiation evolve into integrated value systems, which involve the development of complex organizational models. The market growing demand for ethical fashion brands and products suggests that ethics in fashion have a tendency to be a requirement in a near future for most brands.

We argue that the market trends within a relatively short time point towards the adoption of ethical principles by the fashion brands and towards the adoption of social responsibility by companies that manage these brands. These two aspects will be an essential condition for competitiveness in order to survive in the global market. This trend could be considered similar to those that have determined the emergency requirement of other competitive factors such as quality. While the competitive material or technological may be

spread at a relatively rapid rate and with similar characteristics across the value chain; the strategies focused on values such as ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility, however, are substantially more complex and can vary according to nature and depth. Thus, it may be considered that instead of tackling the fashion brands in terms of their competitiveness restrictions, these values appear as an extension of their normal elements of differentiation as style and fashion image.

**Key-words:** Ethical Fashion, Fashion Brands, Fashion Marketing, Fashion Brands Sustainability, Ethical Fashion Consumers.

## **1 Introduction**

Ethical fashion emerges at the association of the workers rights' concerns – implied in fair trade movements – with the environmental and energetic crisis – that growingly intensified – putting global scale socioeconomic systems under pressure and driving the growth in green product offerings. Over the last decade the number of ethical values incorporated in fashion proposals has progressively and sustainably increased. To ethical brands, that offer ethical values and build their market images around these same values, rapidly many others have joined, even without market images linked to ethical fashion. These brands launch products or specific product lines.

This movement may be considered an answer to the market trends, since consumers assume fair trade and ecological values as decisive elements in their purchasing option. The growing demand for ethical fashion gave rise to a support movement that extended to luxury brands and determined the emergence of the new concept of sustainable luxury. Explaining the change of offer structure in high fashion brands there should be the fact that market studies point to a significant increase in the percentage of consumers that consider important the ethical production of the clothes they buy. For instance, in the UK, the ethical fashion market more than quadrupled between 2004 and 2008 (McAspurn, 2009).

This occurrence is connected to the fact that moral and ethical issues related to consumption have been increasingly examined over the last decade. Several authors look into the attitudes of consumers and it becomes clear that, as emphasized by Beard (2008) and Zelizer (2010), the consumers show a polarization between the ethical implications of consumption and the moral concerns over demand for luxury products. The opportunity for differentiation by ethical and ecological values offers new fashion brands the chance to gain sustainable market positions and their spread is remarkable.

The importance of ethical fashion, in terms of consumer demand and emergence of new brands, has determined its launch on International Fairs in the first half of this decade. 'Prêt-à-Porter' became part of an area for its presentation and the Ethical Fashion Show – also in Paris – was created and first opened its doors in 2004, organised by Messe Frankfurt with the goal to prove that on the one hand, «ethical fashion is both trend, creativity and generates social and environmental benefits» and on the other hand, allows «the meeting of all backgrounds' creators – that join the ethical fashion – with buyers of the textile chain».

In addition to traditional trade, it is also observed a continuous growth of the ethical brands on e-commerce. It is particularly interesting to note the steady increase in ethical and ecological brands whose market presence is realized in virtual environments, through commercial sites of brands and virtual shopping centres.

## **2 The Consumption of Ethical Fashion**

As Goodman (2010) stresses, the act of buying places individual in a group and fashion acts as regulator of lifestyles, a way for individuals to invent themselves. The ethical fashion option arises as an ideological statement that is communicated by the use of eco-sensitive brands, and by products made with recycled materials. New Age consumers, especially hip consumers, characterized by non-conformity, irony and an attitude of rebellion, adopting consumption behaviors that demonstrate they are earth-friendly and socially responsible, prefer products made with natural fibers.

Green consumption, specifically, is connected with consumers' attitudes towards environmental issues. According to a study of Laroche, Bergeron & Barbaro-Forleo (2001), consumers who are willing to pay more for green products are those that don't consider environmentally friendly behavior as inappropriate. Thus, it is important that marketing

communication publicizes the reasons why it is essential to choose green products and change consumer understandings within a possible adverse perception of the inconvenience that this consumption may involve. Simultaneously, the positive or negative attitude of consumers towards the offering of eco-friendly products is related to corporate image. Consumers that regard environmental issues as important have the tendency to refuse to buy products manufactured by companies that don't respect the environment. To this extent, the adoption of a reliable environmental strategy constitutes a competitive sustainable advantage. In the case of fashion, the disadvantages of the use of ethical products may relate to higher prices and more ethnic styles. Yet, the growing number of ethical fashion brands has been changing this situation and has come upon a significant range of styles and preferences.

Differentiation within ethical fashion on the one hand, needs to be supported by effective communication that enables consumers to know the raw materials used and their environmental impact during production, the trade practices with products, the manufacturing procedures involved and everything that could contribute to strengthen consumer confidence in the value of the product or brand.

Young fashion consumers, between 21 and 26 years old in the UK and in Germany, in a study conducted by Joergens (2006), show that they are a consumers' group that doesn't consider ethics as a criterion of choice for fashion. However, this group showed two important points: some disbelief in relation to the brands' statements as far as authenticity of their message is concerned and they clearly felt that the choice for these brands depended on the offered fashion image, the quality and the prices similar to non ethical brands.

Littrell, Ma & Halepete (2005), on the other hand, point that in the USA, Generation X, Baby Boomers and Swing<sup>1</sup> converge with regard to the importance they attach to fair trade practices and express equal concern about poverty, workers' rights and the problems of poor countries. Thus, this is no justification for the brands or the retail to establish services, merchandising strategies or promotional messages for each of these different

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<sup>1</sup> Generation X, individuals born between 1965 and 1975; baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964; swing, born between the early 1930s and 1945.

consumer groups. However, Generation X reacts more positively to messages that emphasize more the image of fashion than comfort, value and quality of the products. Baby Boomer and Swing, by contrast, are more receptive to promotional messages that focus on comfort, quality and value of ethical clothing. The study also revealed that the main motivation of future demand for fair trade clothing is the preference for ethnic-inspired clothing. Consequently, the advertisements find in uniqueness, ethnicity, and quality the differentiation elements that offer value to brands for these consumers.

### **3 Ethical Fashion Marketing**

Ethical fashion emerges as a “label” that tags a significant range of approaches. Initially the concept of ethical was connected to fair trade and respect for workers’ rights. Thus, the image of these brands was linked to practices of no exploitation of raw materials (paid at a fair price) and no exploitation of producers and workers (payment of fair wages to handcrafters and blue-collar workers). With the development of ethical brands, the concept also covers market proposals with ecological concerns, promoting the usage of organic raw materials, which means, cultivated or produced with low environmental impact (Joergens, 2006).

The growing complexity of the ethical fashion market is reflected in the development that has occurred and Alexander & Nicholls (2006) emphasize that, from a standpoint of marketing, currently fair trade means the adoption of what they call the 3P: Process, Product and Place. 3 Ps also represent the development of fair trade marketing to the extent that the market growth of ethical products and brands has been achieved through the development of business focus from process to product to next cover the place. Regarding the process, the main function of marketing is to build consumer confidence in the authenticity of the process adopted by the fair-trade brand or company. The movements called greenwash (adoption of ethical practices by large global corporations as a way to gain capital of goodwill for their business) resulted in some distrust among consumers regarding the messages associated with fair trade practices and proclaimed environmental respect. Market strategies of ethical brands therefore require that marketing must have the ability to assure consumers that the messages are genuine.

The market growth for ethical products has required the focus of marketing to be extended to the product, repositioning it in terms of quality and differentiation that takes into account the lifestyle of the target market segments. From the point of view of fair trade,

the developing of new products need to be focused on the demands of both consumer and producer as well as on the promotion of the extension of the distribution network, making the brands and products accessible to a growing number of consumers.

The next stage of development of fair trade marketing focuses on consumers called "do what I can" group. This group consists of people with reduced ethical concerns but still committed to ethical problems, especially those affecting the cities or regions where they live. The ethical brands targeted to this segment allow these consumers to act according to their concerns through consumption. Marketing strategies focus especially younger consumers, often brand aware consumers – characterized by a low involvement with ethical causes (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006).

As for implementing marketing strategies in order to steadily increase the transition from consumer purchasing intentions to actual purchase of ethical products, especially with regard to environmental aspects, marketing communication benefits if it focuses on facts and on a pragmatic discourse defined according to the requirements of different market segments. The message must be easily accessible to the target consumer in a step by step process through a multiplicity of channels accessible to brands. Consumers should have available additional information whenever they wish due to the complexity of the issues associated with green products and to the fact that it requires gradual introduction and assimilation. Ethical fashion brands tend to gradually increase the complexity of their differentiation factors. So in order to their differentiation be able to be understood and valued by consumers – leading them to the purchase option – they may benefit from the adoption of integrated marketing communication strategies of "educational" nature and from the sharing of experience of use of products by other consumers (Tadajewski, & Wagner-Tsukamoto, 2006).

The implementation of this strategy is facilitated by the widespread use of the internet among ethical brands. On websites, brands find their ideal place for communicating their missions, objectives and strategies, for presenting the products and the operating procedures. Several are associated to blogs, including links to sites with information about issues of interest to the brand or to the consumers. The proliferation of online brands associated with ethical fashion may be linked to aspects related to the advantages offered by e-commerce, according to Ashworth, Schmidt, & Pioch (2006); this allows brands to implement a strategy based service differentiation, managing a portfolio of multi-niche, focused on consumer convenience and added value. According to those authors, this

strategy is perceived by managers as a defense to achieve sustainability in the current context of change in that only the flexibility and creativity of the company are considered likely to set limits on market success. This advantage requires a careful monitoring of the market and the establishment of relationships with cyber-communities with a leadership role among the target consumers. In addition, the online trading tends to be more cost-effective in the integration of operations across multiple online stores. Thus, the small businesses of fashion get optimum operating conditions and financial consolidation.

The e-commerce also allows shortening the chain between producers, distributors/retailers and consumers. As Low & Davenport (2006) refer this is essential for the fair trade movement and enables to create conditions so that the various actors of the value chains join together to create "value" of social change, social development, fairness (justice) and equity (value) through consumption.

As Geigenmüller (2010) emphasizes excellence and perceived quality of products offered electronically affects consumer satisfaction and, presumably, their motivation to participate in a service offer and to share valuable information with the service provider. This author warns, however, for the need to provide consumers with emotional stimuli that increase their motivation to purchase the products through virtual platforms. Emotional stimuli are particularly relevant to the ethical fashion business as they offer a complex set of values but in which the image of fashion is extremely important for the sustainability of brands in the market.

Marketing accompanies this movement, gradually replacing the discourse of the fair trade by messages of "shopping for a better world" and practices which ensure that brands adopt the principles of fair trade correctly, communicating both products and an ideology of change. This change and consumers responsiveness in this message mark the development of an "ecological citizenship" and contribute to raising awareness for the social and environmental impacts of consumption's behaviours (Low & Davenport, 2006).

#### **4 Social Responsibility in Ethical Fashion**

The impact of the social dimension of ethical fashion on the populations of less developed countries comes as a direct result of growing consumer awareness and the consequent importance of these offers.

Quickly fair trade practices were extended to the implementation of activities supporting the development of rural communities in developing countries. Ethical fashion brands led even further their action and implemented action programs aiming development of local populations: occupation of handcrafters, creation of production organizations, quality control, distribution, product development, etc., without neglecting the principles of Fair Trade.

Fair trade, in addition to meeting a consumer need, focuses on helping the most disadvantaged producers on the planet – becoming a positive effect of globalization (Witkowski, 2005). The author stresses that this sustainable alternative marketing system is necessary to lead to the creation of strong brands professionally managed. Therefore, the fair trade movement to reach its potential as a competitive advantage needs to support the development of companies and brands and not to seek support in grants and volunteering.

Currently, ethical fashion has several dimensions:

- The Workers and Suppliers dimension
- The Environmental dimension
- The Social dimension

The interconnection of these three dimensions results in the emergence of the concept of social responsibility associated with fashion brands.

Social Responsibility emerges as a sustainability strategy; and companies and ethical fashion brands and “engagé” brands are precisely those that most significantly intensify their social responsibility programs, in which fair trade, environment and social intervention inextricably intertwine. This interplay appears to be inevitable given the global economic context and the need for brands to ensure the supply of natural raw materials, produced with low environmental impact, manufactured according to the principles of respect for workers' rights, the final product quality, the comfort, the design and the products' distribution in the markets.

## **5 Ethical Fashion Brands**



Ethical brands have a market presence in increasing numbers and their differentiation follows a wide range of elements. It is precisely the diversity of approaches that shows on the one hand, the sustainability of this strategy and that is on the other hand, a market opportunity for new fashion brands.

As it can be seen in Table 1, the main brands statements and differentiation elements<sup>2</sup> take into account multiple aspects, from the fair trade to quality control and environmental protection certified systems. More restricted approaches are taken by newer brands while the earlier founded brands bring forward sets of integrated elements of differentiation, which involve complex organizational models.

The growing complexity of ethical brands' offerings in terms of the number of years of the market conduct suggests that the choice of ethical fashion gives companies the possibility of organizational development and sustained growth; and regardless of the selected focus in the initial phase of activity this tends to cover progressively the aspects of fair trade, of environmental preservation, of quality assurance, of comfort, of style and social action in areas where the company operates and/or where establishes supply contracts. A particular evidence in all the observed ethical fashion brands is the concern for customer satisfaction and the integrated range of values – from comfort, to product quality and style or image fashion to, through conscious consumption, the possibility of the client to contribute to its future social and environmental well-being and to the well-being of other humans on a local or global scale.

**Table 1 – Ethical Fashion Brands and their differentiation**

Brands	Statement	Main differentiation elements
<b>American Apparel</b> 1989	Fashionable basics manufactured with pride in the USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Home land production.</li> <li>• Pioneer industry standards of social and environmental responsibility in the workplace.</li> <li>• Promotion of environmentally-friendly practices, using solar power, recycling fabric scraps and utilizing organic cotton.</li> <li>• Donation of hundreds of thousands of garments to local charities.</li> </ul>

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<sup>2</sup> The statements and differentiation elements of brands were taken from the official websites.

<p><b>People Tree</b> 1991</p>	<p>Exclusive Fashion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fair Trade principles.</li> <li>• Pioneer ecologically sound methods of production and minimize environmental impact.</li> <li>• Provide training to artisans and their organizations.</li> <li>• 50% advance payments on orders</li> <li>• Help fund local communities (education for children, ...)</li> <li>• Allow enough time for production by hand.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Howies</b> 1995</p>	<p>The best thing we can do for the environment is to make our stuff last a real long time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher quality product to last longer.</li> <li>• It will keep on performing as it was designed to for longer before it finally needs replacing. And so over its lifespan it will have consumed less valuable resources than an inferior product that will have been replaced many times.</li> <li>• <b>Earth Tax</b> - 1% of turnover or 10% of pre-tax profits (whichever is greater) offered to grass-root environmental and social projects.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gossypium</b> 2000</p>	<p>Fairtrade certified. Organic cotton fashion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility (customers, suppliers, environment).</li> <li>• Sustainability (sustainable fibers, sustainable farming, sustainable livelihoods for all workers, sustainable methods of production, sustainable clothes).</li> <li>• Transparency (from Farmer to Consumer, Communication with costumers and with suppliers, Names and Locations).</li> <li>• Agriculture (Environmental Policies for Growers - Organic Criteria - Only Agrocel Pure and Fair cotton, grown under the supervision of the Agrocel Service centres are used, Social Policies for Growers - Guaranteed Purchase, Services for Growers, Training and Education for Growers, Fair remuneration for farm laborers, Health and Safety for Growers, Animal Care).</li> <li>• Textile Processing (the brand aim to establish a long term trading relationship with all suppliers, while generating worth-while work and producing high quality clothes. It</li> </ul>

		encourages ethical and environmental best practice along every part of our supply chain).
<b>Beyond Skin</b> 2001	Fret not! No humans, animals or small children were harmed in the making of our shoes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vegan shoes, non leather footwear.</li> <li>• Eco-friendly products and production.</li> <li>• European production.</li> </ul>
<b>Terra Plana</b> 2001 –ethic oriented restructure	We make shoes. Better for you. Better for the environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of recycled materials (as possible) including PET (recycled plastic bottles), partially recycled soling rubbers, foam footbeds, nylon heels and quilts made from material excess.</li> <li>• Minimization of the amount of glue by using stitched constructions.</li> <li>• Use of water-based adhesives. When that's not possible, the brand choose the most eco-friendly option and put time into researching alternatives.</li> <li>• Vegetable tanned leather reduces the amount of toxins and heavy metals needed in a normal tanning process. The leather is prepared using vegetable extracts to create rich and beautiful colors.</li> <li>• Score of products' environmental impact throughout their lifecycle (Eco Matrix).</li> </ul>
<b>Worn Again</b> 2005	Every product has a story to tell.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transform waste and manufacturing patterns (<i>Upcycling</i>);</li> <li>• Sustainable innovation.</li> <li>• Use of textile waste.</li> <li>• Green jobs.</li> <li>• Re-manufacturing industry.</li> <li>• Environmentally Responsible Manufacturing, Transport and Sourcing.</li> <li>• Home land production.</li> </ul>
<b>Edun</b> 2005 (2009 - luxury group LVMH bought 49% share)	Edun was founded on a commitment to encourage trade with Africa. At Edun we believe style should have substance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To encourage trade with Africa and raise awareness of the possibilities there.</li> <li>• Fair trade</li> <li>• Organic top quality cotton.</li> <li>• Responsibility for how products are made.</li> <li>• The eco-system &amp; environment</li> </ul>

		concerns always present.
<b>Amana</b> 2006	To make beautiful clothes with ethical origins and to illustrate that environmentally and socially responsible fashion can equate to exquisite design and quality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainable textiles.</li> <li>• Ethical production practices.</li> <li>• Offset the carbon emissions from the transportation by donating to projects in developing countries that reduce carbon emissions.</li> <li>• Artisans paid three times the minimum wage, offer of advance payments, training and assistance in acquiring more machinery and technology.</li> </ul>
<b>Feral® UK - Ethical Clothing and Global Cooling</b> 2007	We are committed to reducing global warming and climate change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• T-shirts 100% organic cotton.</li> <li>• Fair trade.</li> <li>• Brand mission is to give people a collective and innovative opportunity to slow global warming and climate change by giving 10% of profits to The Climate Group, official partner of Live Earth.</li> <li>• Promise to commit a higher percentage to measures to address global warming if profits rise.</li> </ul>
<b>Grassroot</b> 2007 AND Designs India Ltd (5 brands)	In all we do in all we say – to grow more lovely everyday!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserving tradition.</li> <li>• Empowerment of women.</li> <li>• Use of organic fibers.</li> <li>• Natural Dyes.</li> </ul>
<b>Brin Sauvage</b> 2009	se vêtir sans détruire (to dress with destroy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ecological and ethical brand, sensitive to children's future.</li> <li>• Organic cotton.</li> <li>• Fair trade.</li> </ul>
<b>Ciel</b> 2009 (?)	Conscious Earthwear.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The brand makes a more ethical and environmental choice available to the fashion conscious woman.</li> <li>• Collection is both environmentally and ethically produced using 100% Azo free dyes, re-cycled fabrics or fabrics certified by 'Oekotex' &amp; 'Confidence in Textiles'.</li> </ul>

## 6 Conclusions

The movement of ethical fashion brands has been growing steadily and has deepened in terms of types of offers and differentiation elements. The market acceptance of ethical and ecological fashion brands can be seen firstly as a result of the increase of social awareness of the impact of consumption and, secondly, as a way to contribute, through your own consumption, to improve the living conditions of the poorest countries or of socially disadvantaged groups.

To claim that the growing market awareness due to global social and environmental problems tends to turn the ethical or social responsibility positions of corporate and fashion brands into a condition of acceptance by consumers only reflects one aspect of the problem of ethical fashion.

The reasons for the growth of demand and supply of ethical fashion are not easy to define and the explanation is not direct. Some brands offer some consumer groups a way "to do what they can". Others focus on active contribution to environmental protection. And others fight for human rights and workers rights. They abandon the ethnic look to embrace a diversity of styles and fashion images. They propose values associated with consumers' well-being and health, values associated with the environmental footprint reduction in terms of cultivation of raw materials and of manufacture, and propose values connected to material reuse and recycling. From simple to more complex proposals, the ethical fashion brands and the offers of products or ethical fashion lines are expanded by all market segments, from high fashion to T-shirts, from baby to adult, from apparel and footwear to accessories.

Regardless of the nature of the motives that determine the options to buy ethical fashion brands, it is expected that within a few years the brands will come up against the imperative adoption of CSR strategies. Consequently, ethical aspects will relinquish their position as a differentiation factor or as a competitive advantage to be converted into a mere competitiveness factor. Even when the brand's market positioning doesn't consider elements related to fair trade or eco-fashion, strategies and operational practices of the companies will be conducted by these principles.

Strategic marketing and marketing communication play an essential role in the development of ethical fashion insofar as the increasing complexity of the models adopted by companies is not fully perceptible within the product and its use. The impact of the

ethical fashion brands' strategies on consumers depends both on their access to information and on their trust in the information. Therefore the transparency of marketing communication is crucial to the sustainability of these brands, as well as their ability to exert influence on the consumer understanding of the benefits of fair trade, reduction of environmental impact in production, use of renewable, recycled or even reused resources, as well as of the importance of the corporate working responsibly in the society of which it is a part.

The current market and the today environmental and social crisis raise the consumers' sensitivity towards ethical issues in all its dimensions. Ethical fashion emerges as a viable and appropriate response to global market conditions allowing consumers to satisfy their requirements for style and at the same time contribute to reduce the environmental impact of consumption and to improve the living conditions on the planet. Hence fashion abandons the ephemeral to embrace sustainability.

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