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Changing the fabric of fashionable society: Is green the new black?

13:08 Posted by Alison

In recent years, the global green initiative has exploded. An increased awareness of how our lives impact the environment on a day-to-day basis has led to a multitude of sectors attempting to boost their eco-credentials by branching out and developing new business strands or goods deemed more 'earth friendly'.

From light bulbs to coffee beans, the range of eco and fair trade products has steadily expanded, and after decades of whispers amongst the fashion pack, the industry has finally stepped up its game. Eco-chic has been thrust into the spotlight, with the first UK branch of online ethical shopping hub Ascension opening in St Christopher's Place in November, and London Fashion Week's autumn/winter Estethica shows drawing more designers and crowds than ever in 2009.

Having previously been considered the realm of hemp-wearing hippies, eco-fashion hit the catwalks of New York back in 2005, and a growing number of couture labels have since introduced recycled fabrics and materials such as bamboo cloth into their collections. The inclusion of a ten-page ethical fashion spread by Vogue in 2006 confirmed that amongst the fashion elite, it is now cool to have a conscience.

Celebrity endorsement

There are, in fact, a wide range of green apparel sectors and celebrities have been clamouring to claim a stake in each as a result of such high fashion approval. Supermodel Lily Cole recently teamed up with fellow model Katherine Poulton, designer Alice Ashby and entrepreneur Isobel Davies to develop eco-knitwear label The North Circular, which prides itself on using organic wool from Yorkshire Dales-raised Wensleydale Longwool sheep. Through their choice of materials and by maintaining a UK base, the brand is making an effort to preserve the breed and minimise carbon emissions related to textile and product transport.

In the fair trade camp (which involves items produced by a community cooperative, purchased from them at fair prices) Emma Watson is planning to launch a range with retailer People Tree later in the year, whereas Bono and American teen starlet Selena Gomez have even launched their own fair trade labels. Upcycling and the vintage movement are also going from strength to strength, with fashionistas Alexa Chung and Chloe Sevigny flaunting pre-loved outfits every time they leave the house.

Stylish garments made using natural dyes, organic cotton and fairly paid workforces have recently begun filtering onto the high street (with giants Topshop, Gap and Marks and Spencer all stocking eco and fair trade lines). JWT, one of the world's largest trend-tracking companies, has even named 'ethical fashion' as one of its 100 Things to Watch in 2010. Yet despite green garments generating a huge buzz in style savvy circles, shoppers seem reluctant to let go of the so called 'fast fashion' peddled by budget giants Primark, Asda and Peacocks. Cheaply produced, extremely trend driven and designed to have a shelf life as long as their price tags are high, these clothes are the opposite of ethically, environmentally and socially sound. By clinging to and driving practices where immediate financial costs may be low, but moral compromises are prevalent, shoppers could be creating a lack of demand for eco-chic pieces.

Categorising the consumer

Despite the stratospheric rise of public concern about ethical products, mainstream purchasing trends do not show as much of a change in behaviour as there appears to have been in attitude. Increasingly ethically aware chain Marks and Spencer, have divided their customers into four groups to define their true level of commitment to green initiatives, and their segmentation of the market reflects the gap between the degree of discussion and action:

- 'Green crusaders' (11%): "are already making a significant difference themselves and expect businesses to take a lead as well."
- 'If it's easy' (27%): "are willing to play their part provided it does not require significant personal change or sacrifice."
- 'What's the point' (38%) – "are increasingly concerned about environmental and social issues but don't believe that they personally can make a difference."
- 'Not my problem' (24%) – "haven't engaged with green issues to date."

With such a split market (and with only 38% of people actively pursuing a more eco-friendly approach to shopping), more of us need to become 'green crusaders' if there's to be any chance of pushing clothing giants away from the often questionable and wasteful practices tied to fast fashion. Niche stores and labels will continue to provide for the minority (with little progress made by larger retailers) if an estimated 62% of consumers decide to ignore green issues or maintain that they cannot make a difference in the field.

Elaine Cohen, CEO of Beyond Business Ltd and leading CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) and sustainability reporting consultant, has specific expertise in the fashion industry and agrees that by switching to ethical clothing, consumers would send signals to the wider industry and influence supplies. "Shoppers' actions confirm to ethical fashion producers that we value what they are doing to have a positive impact on people and the planet," she explains. This values-based provides a way to change the market; as customers demand more, going green will seem like a more viable option for businesses.

Making the choice to go green

However, researchers have pointed out that in addition to moral assessments, there are other factors that buyers consider when deciding to purchase an ethical brand over a conventional alternative. Quoted in the Financial Times, Chris Davis, from market research firm GfK NOP, cites "brand awareness, the importance of other product/brand criteria and the extent to which buying an ethical brand implies an inconvenience or a 'product



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About Me



Alison

NCTJ qualified magazine journalist and graduate of Southampton University with a first-class honours degree in English (2008). I have previously completed stints at and written for: Digital Spy, Red, Elle, Company and company.co.uk, Wahanda.com, queensofvintage.com, britney.com, closeronline.co.uk, buyingbusinesstravel.com, retailmoves.com, BANG Showbiz, asuitthatfits.com, Grace Cole Beauty's 'Hot Pink' magazine (misscole.co.uk) and Popjustice. I love fashion, beauty, music and lifestyle writing but am happy and able to turn my hand to any subject!

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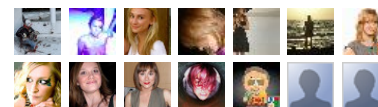
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compromise’ - if at all (e.g. in terms of quality, style, range of options available, etc.), and of course, price” as the main criteria against which consumers judge their purchases.

To improve product availability (and reduce the feeling of compromise), purchasing power is again important. Customers need to support the growing number of organic and alternative fibre clothing ranges to help shake off rumours amongst retailers that ethical fashion is just a passing fad. This in turn will to help expand the number of ranges on offer, as big retailers begin to chase the ethical pound.

In testing economic times, pricing plays a large part in peoples’ decision to buy ethical goods and many perceive green chic to be a more expensive option, especially in comparison to lower-end goods, whose prices continue to tumble. Surveys also demonstrate dwindling concern about companies’ environmental practices in times of recession, with the number of consumers worried about ethical standards dropping by 17% when a recession began at the end of the 1980s. As the economy began to strengthen and people focused less on obtaining the cheapest products, these concerns began to increase again.

Cohen concedes that there are examples of affordable and unaffordable ethical fashion in the marketplace, but believes it is a matter of perspective. If the base line is deemed to be clothing produced by Primark et al, then the cheapest ethical alternatives will always cost more. Yet as you move up the scale towards designer collections, the gap rapidly closes.

“At the higher end of fashion, it is not materials that dictate the price, but the name of the designer,” she explains. Paying for a name inflates the price of goods, and so green alternatives of a similar quality will not be any more expensive. “For example, a fashion client of mine, Bagir (who makes suits for men and sells to major retailers worldwide), has an Eco Suit made from post-consumer recycled bottle fibre that sells at the same prices as regular fabric suits.”

Cohen also highlights the fact that although people see inexpensive clothing as having less impact on their bank balance, ethical fashion can actually cost less in the long run. “Purchasing ethical fashion avoids many hidden costs which the consumer doesn’t calculate – such as the cost of fast fashion throwaways which need to be replaced,” she clarifies. “Buying more, more often, at low cost, costs more than buying a good quality garment infrequently and also, if more people made the ethical choice and increased demand, prices would fall, making it more affordable for everyone.”

Retailer action

Responsibility does not lie solely with the consumer, however. As things stand, there is no clear labelling system that informs the general public about the eco-credentials of a particular item or range of clothing. In fact, many retailers exploit this weakness through a process known as ‘greenwashing’; a form of spin in which they maintain their garments are ethical, eco friendly or otherwise environmentally virtuous when in reality, the right to such claims is minimal. “An example,” says Cohen “would be brands who market their clothing as organic when only a small part of the garment is organic, or natural when cotton is natural but severely damaging to the environment.”

“What is really needed,” she continues, “is a simple, plain language guide to ethical fashion for the average consumer. They should be able to understand ethical fashion in the same way they understand vitamins; most people know vitamins are good for you, and most people know how to find out which foods contains which vitamins and what quantities an average person should consume. People still have to make the choice, but the information is fairly accessible and easy to understand.”

Categorisation, using the model of colour coded nutrition labels, would certainly be a step in the right direction. In 2006, an Ipsos Mori survey found that clearer garment tags, detailing the company and producer’s social, environmental and ethical behaviour, would influence 75% of people’s purchasing choices.

“The average consumer is confused. They are receiving mixed messages and not really understanding the issues at stake, but with improved transparency, they may be more willing to take a stand,” Cohen tells me. “At the moment, without a way to process the information out there, they stick to brands they trust or feel they can easily afford without properly investigating ethical options.” An incremental move towards environmentally graded products seems to be the answer, allowing clothing companies to gently market ethical fashions to mainstream customers, whilst helping consumers understand the differences between products promoted under the umbrella term ‘green’.

Remaining hurdles

What, then, is holding retailers back? There is increasing pressure for carbon labelling to be implemented on clothing, and the revelation that H&M has been discarding mountains of unsold stock has thrown the spotlight on the need for retailers to recycle garments and improve product lifecycles, yet difficulties still remain. Sandra, owner of US based online eco-accessories boutique Sweet Organics, believes the fact that farmers in the States are not government subsidised if they grow so organic cotton is driving up prices of readily available fibres and adversely affecting their use in one of the world’s largest clothing markets. “The real price of other (standard) forms of cotton is hidden from the general public as well,” she adds.

In addition, brands need special technology to process alternative fibres, some of which are not even readily available for use in mass production. “Supply chain auditing would also need to become more thorough to back up ethical claims, increasing costs,” argues Cohen, “and above all, profit margins would need to be maintained to provide the kind of short term results that satisfy shareholders,”

And so it seems it is ultimately the fashion industry’s insatiable need for speed that is hindering its environmental advancement. Experts are still hopeful that consumers and retailers can continue the lengthy process of integrating green practices into their routines and businesses, with brands marketing gradual adaptations to lines as buyers warm to changes in their spending. However, the industry custom of producing at least two new clothing collections each year which encourages fleeting high street fashions still causes frustration. “I believe consumer consciousness is increasing, which will contribute to an improvement, but eco-fashion is still far from becoming mainstream in the next five years, affirms Cohen. “The cycle needs to slow down, the competitive fervour needs to ease and then fashion can make the move from being vicious to virtuous.”

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"Having previously been considered the realm of hemp-wearing hippies, eco-fashion hit the catwalks of New York back in 2005, and a growing number of couture labels have since introduced recycled fabrics and materials such as bamboo cloth into their collections. The inclusion of a ten-page ethical fashion spread by Vogue in 2006 confirmed that amongst the fashion elite, it is now cool to have a conscience."

Posted on 14 January 2010 14:47

2. **Anonymous** Said,

Nice brief and this post helped me alot in my college assignement. Thank you for your information.

Posted on 18 January 2010 01:09

3. **Anonymous** Said,

Interesting article,

Though I think 'ethical' and 'eco' are very different things.

While it's fantastic that M&S have signed up for this 'Plan A' campaign, I'm highly skeptical that Marks and Spencers are anything approaching ethical...

http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/retailing/article6677484.ece

I think going green is often used as an 'easy win' for some of these budget retailers like Primark, Peacocks and Tesco in particular. It gives them some of those fashionable 'humanitarian credentials' that discerning shoppers look for, while distracting attention from some of their more questionable employment practices in regards garment workers in Bangladesh.

Posted on 21 January 2010 09:43

4. **Anonymous** Said,

Interesting post. Though I think we need to be careful to differentiate 'green' from humanitarian.

Particularly in the case of M&S - while their 'Plan A' campaign is all very admirable, they're still guilty of using sweatshop labour in order to produce their goods..

http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/retailing/article6677484.ece

Posted on 21 January 2010 10:01

5. **Alison** Said,

I think 'green' can encompass both. The concept of sustainability links the two: you can be socially responsible and preserve moral/fair standards of production and trade, and environmentally responsible with eco-friendly choices.

In combination, as the Ethical Fashion Forum puts it, it involves 'maximising benefits to people and communities while minimising impact on the environment.'

And I agree about preventing the tick-one-box-and-then-you're-green mentality.

Here's another comment from Elaine that didn't quite fit in the final piece:

"...It's hard to pick one leader, and I don't think we need to. Each [green retailer/brand] is a leader in something. What we need to do is ensure that everyone reaches second base in *everything*, and not everyone is there yet. All the major retailers recently boycotted Uzbekistan cotton, for example, once the issues of forced labour and child labour became known in Uzbekistan supply. It doesn't matter who was first. It matters that everyone took a stand against abuse of human rights in their supply chains."

Posted on 21 January 2010 18:25

6. **Anonymous** Said,

Awesome! Great idea, but will this really work?

Posted on 1 February 2010 03:13

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