

Aesthetical or Rational: Gender Differences in Ethical Fashion Consumption

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Abstract

Currently the fashion system is in a state of imbalance and has huge environmental impact. Fast fashion consumption is part of this problem. To understand the issues behind fashion consumption and especially the gender issues, more research needs to be done. This paper presents an empirical study concentrating on gender issues in fashion consumption. The study focuses on the differences between females' and males' expressed reasons for their purchases, consumers' environmental worries and the short- and long-term use of garments. The main findings showed that women are more fashion-oriented consumers looking for emotional pleasures through aesthetical aspects, while men are a more rational type of consumers, emphasizing more garment quality and trustworthy fashion brands. These findings should be taken into account in attempts to encourage more sustainable behaviours and in pushing companies towards ethical actions and environmental marketing.

Keywords: Fashion; Consumption; Gender; Ethical consumption.

Introduction

Fashion is based on ever-changing styles, grounded in time and social acceptance. Fashion is a process of continuous change, which strongly connects to consumers' identity building through appearance and external symbols. Fashion takes a central place in our society, and fashion consumption plays an important role in fulfilling not only people's needs, but also desires. Fashion consumption includes many steps: selecting, purchasing, use, disposal of a product, but also it can include consuming services or experiences (Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). During these different consumption steps, a consumer can consider ethical and environmental issues, or then not.

The fashion system creates desires for consumers to buy more and more. Fast fashion, which is based on fast manufacturing, huge consumption figures and even fast disposal, is the norm of the current fashion industry. Evidence of this fast material throughput in the system is seen in the increasing textile waste figures in all Western countries (Allwood *et al.*, 2016). This increase indicates the imbalance and unsustainability of the fashion system. Furthermore Western consumers own an increasing number of fashion items that are not actively used but stay in the wardrobe (Fletcher, 2012). This shows the huge size of fashion system, which effectively creates new fashion trends and products, and moreover desires for consumers to buy new and dispose of the old, despite the environmental impact of this industry and the environmental impact of current fashion consumption practices.

Fashion consumption is based on hedonistic consumption, which includes emotional, sensorial and fantasy aspects of product use or owning; it is motivated by the desire to look for pleasure (Kirgiz, 2014). It is said that “consumers prefer not only the best one, but also the thing that makes them happiest” (Kirgiz, 2014: p.201). “Pleasure seeking is the highest beauty” in hedonistic consumption (Hopkins & Pujari, 1999: p.273). Hedonistic consumers emphasize other reasons for purchasing than economic, such as: “...playing a role, entertainment, individual satisfaction, learning new trends, sensorial stimulation, social experience, communication with people who have similar interests, attractiveness of the reference group, status and authority” (ibid.: p.201). Hedonism and utilitarian consumerism can be seen as opposite ends of the spectrum of consumer behaviour. Kirgiz (2014) points out that the rational shopper focuses on price, quality and value. He argues that women behave more hedonistically and men as more utilitarian when shopping. These aspects need further investigation.

Even gender is socially constructed; in this study gender is approached as a binary construct of male versus female fashion. The current dominating fashion system is primarily based on this binary position of consumers’ physicality as either male or female consumers, and this is thus the basis for this investigation. As Bristor and Fisher (1993: p.519) argue, “gender is a pervasive filter through which individuals experience their social world, consumption activities are fundamentally gendered.” Schroeder (2003: p.1) also points out that “gender has become a boutique item in the mainstream mall of consumer research”, and therefore gender issues need further attention in consumption studies.

Some researchers investigating fashion consumption practices argue that men and women shoppers are becoming more similar (e.g. Kim, Sullivan & Forney, 2007; Anguelov, 2016), yet gender-related differences do still exist. Furthermore the meaning of fashion and fashion purchasing appears to differ by gender. Women spend more time shopping (or planning for it), and shopping offers emotional experiences, an escape from reality into a fashion fantasy world, and boosts in emotional levels, all of which appear to be more important aspects for women (Yurschisin & Johnson, 2010). Therefore more women than men have been seen as ‘addicted’ to fashion shopping and behaving unsustainably, such as impulse buying (Yurschisin & Johnson, 2010). Impulse purchasing is tied to the emotional side of consumption, quick decisions, and even a short use-time of garments and their easy disposal (Niinimäki, 2011). Earlier studies have shown that younger consumers are more attracted to impulse shopping than older ones (Wood, 1998), and women tend to practice impulse shopping more often than men (Johnson & Attman, 2009). However in online shopping, it is men who appear to do more impulse shopping virtually (Zhang, Prybutok & Strutton, 2007). On the other hand Workman and Cho (2012) argue that especially with young consumers, gender differences are small in fashion purchasing, especially in impulse shopping or in quality, brand or price purchasing orientation. Yet they found that men tend to prioritize convenience in purchasing and women recreational shopping and fashion-consciousness (ibid.).

How, then, do these emotional or value-based gender differences affect ethical consumption? Ethical consumption in the fashion field can be defined to mean more environmentally-conscious decisions when purchasing, using or disposing garments. Ethical consumption can be linked to attempts to buy less and favour ethical brands, to decrease the environmental impact during maintenance and to extend the use-time of garments. Furthermore the use of services to minimize one’s own ecological footprint can be seen as an ethical act in the fashion field (e.g. renting instead of buying). Ethical and green consumerism has become normal, common behaviour and especially so in the studied context, Finland, where the population is well educated and environmental awareness is high (Autio, Heiskanen & Heinonen, 2009). Yet the attitude-behaviour gap in the ethical fashion field still does exist, and only a minority of consumers are willing to enact their ethical

interests or act according to their environmental worries (Niinimäki, 2010). One study done in Finland (Niinimäki, 2010) showed that 63% of consumers were interested in ethical issues in general, 49% thought about ethical and environmental issues often, 17% thought about these issues when purchasing textiles and clothing, but only 9% of respondents could be defined to be ethical hardliners, who always actualize their ethical value base when purchasing textiles and clothing. Ethical hardliners have a more stable identity and value base than average consumers: in other words, they know who they are and they are thereby able to resist changing fashions and impulse buys. They have made an ethical commitment to follow their own ethical value base, and therefore they always evaluate purchase options based on ethical or sustainable criteria (Niinimäki, 2010). An earlier study has shown that environmentally active consumers are more often women who are well educated and have higher incomes (Oksanen, 2002). Yet in the fashion context, younger consumers with lower incomes are also interested in the environmental issues of clothing (Niinimäki, 2010; 2011).

Moisander (2001: pp.181-195) has identified three discourses in ethical and “green” consumerism. The first is an individualist moral discourse, where the consumer is a well-informed and rational individual actor, a “morally exemplary citizen”. The second discourse is an aesthetically and spiritually-oriented green consumer, who is connected to the voluntary simplicity movement. For example LOVOS (Voluntarily simplifying one’s lifestyle) or LOHAS (Lifestyles of health and sustainability) movements invite people to voluntarily lower their consumption or even income levels. Some movements even espouse voluntary poverty while also investing in good living, better life quality including health issues (e.g. organic food and eco-products), and even self-sufficient households. The third discourse is a consumer linked to asocial and fanatic activism. Accordingly, the profiles of green and ethical consumers are rational, aesthetical or activist. These profiles also have an emotional connotation. Fashion purchasing gives us experiences of emotional “highs”, especially for materialistic consumers (Richins *et al.*, 1992), but also consumers shop more and more on impulse when they are in a happy mood (e.g. Beatty & Ferrel, 1998). Therefore we can say that emotions play an important role in fashion consumption. But do both genders experience similar fashion emotions? How can we understand fashion consumption more deeply from the gender viewpoint? And are there still gender differences when fashion consumers are expressing their ethical value base and linking it to fashion consumption practices? This study has thus focused on gender issues in fashion consumption in order to open up new views on ethical fashion consumption.

Research design

This study is based on empirical data collected in Finland in 2010 with a snowball sampling method, with a total of 203 respondents. An online survey was conducted where consumers’ attitudes to sustainable products and ethical consumption were mapped out. Of the respondents 70% were female. The respondents’ age categories are presented in Table 1. The respondents were highly educated: 50% had a Master’s degree (the average in the Finnish population being 27% with a Master’s degree), and 23% had gone through vocational school (39% is the corresponding average in the Finnish population). The income levels were as follows: 13% reported having no income, 39% reported having less than 2000 €/month, 27% between 2001-2999 €, 16% between 3000-4999 €/month, and 7% reported having more than 5000 €/month.

A total of 88% of men and 95% of women reported that in general they are interested in ethical and ecological issues in products and their manufacturing (for this question, on a five-point Likert scale: “I am interested in ethical consumption and

the environmental impact of products”). Furthermore the respondents’ ethical value base was probed through their garment purchasing with this question: “Ethicality, safety (free of toxic chemicals) and the environmental impact of textile products and production affect my purchasing decision”. The respondents’ ethical value base can be seen in Table 2 (the category “do not know” has not been included in this table).

Table 1: Age

Age category	Men (n)	Women (n)
18-25	9	51
26-35	29	69
36-45	15	12
46-55	5	10
56-64	2	1
All	60	143

Table 2: Ethical interest

Ethical interest	Never % “Not interested”	Seldom % “Do what I can”	Often % “Conscious consumers”	Always % “Ethical hardliners”
Female	7	20	47	22
Male	15	27	37	10

“Ethical hardliners” are consumers who are not only interested in ethical issues, but also realize their value base in their purchases, also when buying textile and garment products. It appears that female consumers report more often on their ethical value base than men, but let us continue the investigation of gender issues in ethical consumerism.

Hedonism or utilitarian purchasing

Table 3 presents the respondents’ comments on the attributes that affect their garment purchasing. According to this study, the opinions are surprisingly similar comparing genders. The largest difference is seen in the aesthetical side of the garments. Women more often reported that a yearning for beauty was the reason for buying a new or particular garment. The need to follow fashion and changing trends was also more important for women than men.

Women are more often defined to be hedonic consumers who fulfil their need for materialistic consumption more than men, while men are defined to be utilitarian shoppers (Kim, Sullivan & Forney, 2007). This definition nicely describes the emotional side of fashion consumption, which has more allure for women than men. Hine (2002) has pointed out that shopping is one of the most favoured things women want to do, while for men it is the opposite, the last thing on which they want to spend leisure time. Shopping also seems to be an important social activity for women and even one way to express their creativity (Yurchisin & Johnson, 2010).

Table 3: Reasons for garment purchasing

Garment purchasing	Men %	Women %
Real need	78	76
Need to renew	48	51
Deep consideration	48	51
Impulse shopping	22	25
Yearning for beauty	8	54
Following fashion	10	18
Social pressure for certain kind of appearance	8	6
Need to show own ideology	15	17

Table 4: Garment purchasing

Most important factors in garment purchasing	
Men	Women
1. Style 78%	1. Fit 67%
2. Price 67%	2. Style 65%
3. Fit 65%	3. Price 63%
4. Quality 62%	4. Suitability for existing wardrobe 52%
5. Suitability for existing wardrobe 47%	5. Quality 51%
6. Material 43%	6. Material 46%
7. Colour 40%	7. Colour 42%
8. Brand 23%	8. Long lifetime 33%
9. Long lifetime 22%	9. Eco/ethical 30%
10. Eco/ethical 15%	10. Easy care 18%
11. Easy care 12%	11. Brand 10%
12. Local production 3%	12. Local production 8%

Table 4 displays the answers to this question: “Think about your recent clothing purchases and name 5 of the most important factors for the purchase decision you made”. Some gender difference can be seen here. Quality, which links to a garment’s longevity, was less important for women than men. This is an interesting finding, as at the same time women are emphasizing the long lifetime of the garments more than men. High quality enables a garment’s long lifetime. According to this finding, the attribute associated with long life may mean different things for women than men; women are possibly looking more for the style and colour, the aesthetical dimensions, that last over time compared to men, who may more emphasize quality and perhaps a more classic style in their garments in general.

When the most important factors for purchase decision were discussed, garments’ ecological and ethical factors were in 9th place for women and 10th place for men. However twice as many women had chosen this option compared to men. As

women are reported to be more environmental aware than men and especially so in the fashion field, this finding is in line with earlier studies.

An interesting aspect is also the influence of brand. While an earlier study by Workman and Cho (2012) concluded there is no notable gender difference in garment purchasing from the perspectives of quality or brand, this study saw a different outcome. Men seem to seek or rely on a certain brand more often than women. An earlier study has shown (Niinimäki, 2011; 2014) that when seeking quality, something that is difficult to evaluate in the purchase situation, consumers rely on a brand that has earlier offered him/her the experience of quality, especially quality in use. The finding from the current study is in line with this, and therefore we can conclude that while men value quality in garments, they also seek quality through a certain reliable brand.

Table 5: Satisfaction with latest purchasing

Satisfaction with latest purchasing	
Men %	Women %
Quality 59	Fit 62
Fit 53	Colour 62
Feel and touch 48	Feel and touch 53
Use experience 46	Material 51
Expectations 42	Beauty experience 43
Colour 42	Quality 44
Material 39	Expectations 33

When asked about the satisfaction attributes with regards to the latest garment purchases, women emphasized aesthetical issues like fit, colour and the feel and touch of the garment when worn. Furthermore 43% of women reported being happy with the beauty experience, while for men this aspect was mentioned by only 19% of respondents. Men were satisfied with the quality, fit, feel and touch of the garment when worn and the use experience (functionality). These findings highlight that female consumers focus more on aesthetical aspects while men more on the rational side of fashion consumption. Moreover men were more satisfied in terms of their product expectations (42%) than women (33%), which might link to men's way of considering their purchasing more than women, as well as women's tendencies to buy fast fashion, low quality or even on impulse.

It is also useful to note the dissatisfaction issues with the latest garment purchases, which were also probed in this study. Men were dissatisfied with the provided product information (31%), e.g. information about the production location was missing. The location of manufacturing has been recognized to be one factor through which consumers evaluate the environmental impact of the manufacturing and the ethical issues in the working conditions of industry workers (Niinimäki 2011). In Europe and in nearby textile-producing countries like Turkey, working conditions are better regulated, compared to the situation in Bangladesh or other Far East countries. Moreover consumers trust that the industrial production has less environmental impact and that it is regulated and monitored by authorities in proximal countries (to Europe) compared

to production in China or further afield. Accordingly consumers want to trust “local production”, even if local extends to production in Europe. The second biggest issue in dissatisfaction was the shopping experience for men (25%). For example they commented that it was hard to find suitable and well-fitting garments, it was hard to evaluate quality when purchasing and it was hard to find enough information behind the product. The life span of the garment (18%) and quality in use (14%) also caused dissatisfaction for men. For women the ranking of issues causing dissatisfaction differs. The lifespan of the garment (25%), quality (24%), product information (24%) and shopping experience (23%) were nearly all equally important issues for women’s dissatisfaction.

Environmental consideration during different phases in the garment’s life cycle

By asking “Did you consider the environmental impact of textiles in any of the following stages?”, the inquiry tried to map respondents’ awareness of the environmental impact of their own behaviour. Table 5 shows some gender differences. In general the most worrying stage for both men and women is garment disposal. Women appear to be more ready to find alternatives before purchasing. They are more ready to commit to an ethical act, by comparing brands and finding information. This might also link to the idea of a fashion hunt (e.g. Armstrong *et al.*, 2016): women tend to think about their fashion acts more than men, e.g. the shopping before the action of purchase. This is part of the fashion entertainment aspect, which seems to be also relevant in ethical fashion consumption. Therefore it is important that ethical companies try to be as transparent as possible with their design and manufacturing activities and ethical and environmental information provided to consumers.

Table 6: Considering environmental impact during consumption phases

Phase	Men %	Women %
when disposing	66	60
when searching for alternative options	52	65
while purchasing	32	44
when purchase need arises	22	25
while using	20	31

Table 7: Considering environmental impact during different production phases

Phase	Men %	Women %
Short life	68	78
Fibre cultivation	51	49
Location of manufacturing	32	52
Product processing	33	52
Transportation	30	35
Fibre processing	30	36
Disposal of the product	28	34

In the survey, more details were also solicited about respondents’ understanding of the environmental impacts of the textile industry through the question “Which production phases worry you most from the environmental viewpoint?” For women and men the short lifetime of clothing was the biggest worry (Table 7). “Honestly saying, when you love the colour of the garment when you’re buying it, it is faded after the first wash. The quality of clothes is so low nowadays.” The manufacturing location and product processing worry women more than men. One comment from the survey, “No idea about the product’s background”, conveys the wish to get more information about the manufacturing of this item. “For example the bad working conditions in the factories worries me.” “For example all the chemicals they put into products cause worries.” Women are also a bit more worried about the short life of garments. This finding is associated with the fact that women are more often the “fashion lovers”, buying and consuming more garments than men, and at the same time being more conscious about the environmental impacts of the garment industry.

Garment use

Respondents were asked to estimate the shortest time they have used some garments. In the survey, 10% of men and 22 % of women reported using some garment for less than one month. Respondents gave reasons for a short use time, such as low quality, impulse shopping and wrong purchase decision.

Some things I have bought I will never use. The reason is that they have been impulse purchases from sales, and they do not fit into my style or with other garments in my wardrobe. And then I have these kinds of (especially T-shirt) garments that are ruined after the first wash. (woman, age 26-35)

I buy something that is affordable, then the product wears out after the first wash! It has happened to me a couple of times. (man, age 26-35)

Then (and this happens seldom), when you notice that something you bought does not fit nicely (physically or mentally), I look around to whom of my friends I could give it or then I give it to charity through some reliable organization. When I give away my old garments, they are still in such good condition that I will not throw them away as waste. (man, age 46-55)

Based on the comments in the survey, women give more emotional reasons for their garment use or disposal and come across as quite honest. In contrast men try to point out that they have rational reasons even for the disposal of garments, and therefore they highlight that they are not unsustainable consumers.

Table 8: The shortest use time

Shortest use time	Men	Women
Less than 1 month	10	22
1-2 months	12	9
3-6 months	26	30
7 months -1 year	26	28
1-2 years	22	13

Table 9: Longest use time

Longest use time	Men %	Women %
more than 5 years	74	66
4-5 years	7	12
3-4 years	9	14
2-3 years	7	6
1-2 years	1	0
7 months-1 year	1	1

Moreover, respondents were asked to estimate the lifespan of their oldest and most used garment (Table 9).

I have several garments from the 1980s that I still use. They were quite expensive when I bought them, but still after several times in the laundry (a good washing machine is included in this), they are like new, because the materials are top quality. Also styles and colours are classic, when you eliminate the effect of changing fashion trends. And taking care of your body is part of the process, so that you can fit in your old garments for decades. (man, age 46-55)

This short description, a quotation from the survey, opens up the many levels needed for sustainable consumption: durability through high quality and a classic style, good investment in long life spans through higher prices and higher quality, good garment maintenance, and control of your body size.

I have demanding taste, and therefore it is hard for me to find garments that I really like. Shoes do last long, because I take good care of them. Overall textiles and clothing last long, because I make long-term purchase decisions. I buy garments only when I find something really special, something I really like and are high quality. I hate badly made and low quality garments. I love garments that I have found, and I take good care of them, so that they last as long as possible, because if a garment I love starts to fall apart, I can't be sure I will find a suitable one to replace it. When I find something really wonderful, I buy 2 of them, so that I can use them for as long as possible. (woman, age 26-35)

This quotation from the survey is a female description containing many connotations to the emotional side of fashion consumption. The long use-time refers to attachment, liking and loving the garment, but also taking good care of it, committing yourself to the garment. This emotional side of consumption can also be seen in the attachment process towards the garment (Table 10). These findings highlight the meaning of beauty in person-product attachment and long lifetimes of garments especially for female consumers. The meaning of beauty of the garment is a fundamental issue for female consumers, even in ethical clothing.

Table 10: Attachments to garments

	Men %	Women %
They fit well and they are suitable for the use situation	80	85
high quality	80	74
I like the material	59	71
I like the style	56	69
Easy maintenance	36	36
I like the colour	34	50
They are beautiful	34	57

Discussion

This study has been quite exploratory, and the findings have limitations because of the size of the empirical data and the study being site specific. Perhaps this investigation raises more questions than it answers, yet it highlights several relevant issues regarding ethical fashion consumption and gender. The study was based on an online survey, mapping respondents' opinions more than real consumption habits, which limits the knowledge of the long-term impact of the factors in this study. Yet the study highlights some gender differences, which are also linked to ethical fashion consumption.

To draw conclusions from the previously presented findings, the argument can be made that women are more fashion-oriented shoppers looking for emotional pleasures and even fun through aesthetical aspects, while men are more rational and a utilitarian-type of consumers, emphasizing more on quality and trustworthy fashion brands. This is in line with the findings by Kirgiz (2014), who states that women are more emotional consumers and men slightly more rational ones. From these findings it can be argued that from the perspective of ethical consumption, women should be approached through aesthetical dimensions of design and use, while men should be approached more from quality and functional aspects in design and use. To foster sustainable consumption through longevity of garments, women should be offered aesthetical pleasures, while men more appreciate quality, which they seek through trustworthy brands. Moreover transparency in all ethical and environmental information behind the brand, design and manufacturing should be offered to the consumers, even if this might be more meaningful for women, who search for and compare this information before making their purchase decision. Also during the purchase event ethical information should be provided, such as eco-labels or QR (quick response) codes through which more information could be found online. For women who have the need for the fashion hunt and fashion experiences and who are more prone to impulse shopping, more information should be provided about the quality and expected durability and lifetime of garment when purchasing. This might affect their buying behaviour and decision making.

Boosting ethical fashion consumption is not easy, as ever-changing fashion trends and effective fashion marketing create emotional desires and needs that are challenging to counter. A better understanding of the gender issues behind fashion might offer some tools to build fashion offerings that can lead consumers towards ethical considerations, better product satisfaction, extending the use-time of garments and even slowing down fashion consumption.

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For Citation

- Niinimäki, K. (2017) Aesthetical or Rational: Gender Differences in Ethical Fashion Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Ethics*. 1(2), 7-18.

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