

Ethical issues that impact on wool apparel purchases

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Abstract

This paper addresses the ethical issues that impact on the wool apparel purchase behaviour of ethical consumers. Five focus group interviews were conducted with American female ethical consumers that were designed to elicit ethical issues of concern to consumers when making wool apparel decisions. Twelve ethical issues emerged, of which the most frequently cited were labour rights and animal welfare. It seems the wool industry needs to articulate standards that reflect a broad range of people's ethical concerns, including statements about animal welfare and labour rights, if wool apparel is to appeal to ethical consumers.

Keywords: ethical consumerism, wool, apparel

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Introduction and Literature Review

Since the 1990s, principled 'ethical' consumers who are concerned about social, environmental and ethical issues have emerged (e.g. Matthews 1994). The potential impact ethical consumers can have on governments, enterprises and industries has generated an ongoing interest among marketers and managers (Caruana 2007; Korthals 2001). Consumers acting on their ethical concerns can force changes in production and marketing activities through their purchase decisions (Karpatkin 1998; De Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp 2005) or through boycotts (Friedman 1995; Rudell 2006). Ethical consumerism is playing an increasingly important role across a broad and diverse range of product categories. For example, studies have found a positive stated 'willingness to purchase' eggs with animal friendly production practices (Rolfe 1999; Bennett 1997). Such research has exposed a demand for free range and barn laid eggs, which has, in turn, seen the phasing out of conventional cages in the European Union (Appleby 2004). Ignoring people's ethical concerns may lead to the development of inappropriate products or production practices (Auger, Devinney & Louviere 2007).

"Ethical issues" research in clothing contexts is relatively recent and has largely focused on attitudes towards labour exploitation (e.g. Rudell 2006; Dickson 1999; Dickson 2001; Shaw et al. 2007; Shaw et al. 2004) and preferences for socially responsible retailers (e.g. Dickson 2000). However, apparel consumers' concerns about other ethical issues, such as environmental sustainability (Chen & Davis Burns 2006; Abend 1994; Shim 1995; Hustvedt & Bernard 2008) and animal welfare (Peterson, Hustvedt & Chen 2008; Hustvedt, Peterson & Chen 2008), have also been recognised and studied. Ethical apparel consumers choose between many ethical apparel attributes, making such decisions more complex than is currently conceptualised (Cherrier 2007), making the need for further research clear.

An exploratory study was therefore undertaken to fill a small part of this gap by examining which ethical issues are of concern to consumers when they make wool apparel decisions. Wool apparel was seen as an appropriate product to research as wool producers face a range of social, ethical and environmental issues, such as the environmental impact of the chemical residues from processing and dry-cleaning (Chen & Davis Burns 2006), animal welfare (Hustvedt, Peterson & Chen 2008) and the use of contract labour in developing countries (Dickson & Eckman 2006). As an example of such an issue, the Australian wool industry has been the target of a number of ethical campaigns, the most successful being PETA's (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) anti-mulesing¹ campaign, which threatened to lock Australian merino wool out of lucrative apparel markets (Evans 2005) and forced the Australian wool industry to agree to ban mulesing from 2010 (McLachlan & Pietsch 2005). The anti-mulesing campaign's success provides evidence of the need for marketers to better understand such issues from a consumer perspective and the study that was undertaken to provide additional information is discussed in the next section.

¹ Mulesing is a surgical procedure performed on lambs to remove wool-bearing skin from the tail and breech area using shears in order to prevent flystrike. Mulesing has traditionally been performed on Australian sheep without anesthetic or anagesics.

The Present Study

As prior research has not examined these issues in detail, focus groups were seen as an appropriate exploratory approach; as they create an environment in which people have the freedom to share thoughts, opinions and insights, rather than choosing responses from restricted options. Focus groups have been used previously in studies of attitudes towards animal welfare (e.g. Southwell, Bessey & Barker 2006) and ethical apparel consumption (e.g. Rudell 2006). Forty seven female ethical consumers participated in five focus groups in Colorado and New York in the United States, which is a major market for wool apparel (Lempriere 2007). Colorado was selected because of the concentration of outdoor apparel retailers and the high proportion of the local population engaged in outdoor activities. Ethical apparel consumers in Colorado have access to an extensive range of casual and performance wool apparel. New York City was selected as its consumers have access to extensive apparel categories and the city was the location of the 2006 wool Test Marketing Project (Lempriere 2007). A focus group interview guide was developed following Stewart and Shamdasani's (1990) guidelines. Each group ran for approximately two hours and was facilitated by the same person to ensure consistency between the groups.

As there are competing concepts as to what constitutes 'ethical' consumerism, a self-identification approach was used to recruit participants in order to ensure a broad view of ethical consumption was accepted (Newholm 2005). Potential participants were asked to confirm they were someone who 'often considers the social, ethical and environmental attributes of products when making purchase decisions'. Participants were recruited on the basis of their positive response to this invitation (e.g. Newholm 2005). Forty seven such females, who select and purchase their own apparel, shop regularly for their own apparel, do not purchase apparel solely on the basis of price and who would purchase an individual garment priced at over US\$200 participated in the study.

During the focus groups, information was obtained about participants' beliefs about ethical issues in wool apparel consumption. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) have suggested the simplest way to obtain beliefs about a particular behaviour is to ask directly using a free-response format. Consequently, participants were asked to write down the ethical issues they considered when purchasing wool apparel. It was assumed the beliefs that were more likely to predict attitudes would be foremost in the participant's mind and would be reflected in their first five to nine beliefs mentioned (van der Pligt & Eiser 1984; Petkova, Ajzen & Driver 1995; Ajzen, Nichols & Driver 1995; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). The results obtained from this task and their implications are discussed in subsequent sections.

Results

The majority of participants (77%) were US citizens, although some were from other countries. Participants were aged from 20 to 66 years, with a median age of 32 years. The age range and median age of participants was similar to those of samples used in prior ethical consumer research (e.g. Honkanen, Verplanken & Olsen 2006; Shaw et al. 2007; De Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp 2005; Dickson 2000). About a quarter of participants (25%) had an average family income \$24,999 and about a third (37%) had an income of \$100,000 or more. The majority (89%) of participants had a Bachelors Degree or higher, suggesting participants were relatively highly educated as only 26 per cent of US female citizens have such education, which is in line with prior research that found ethical consumers were highly

educated (Carrigan & Attalla 2001; Maignan & Ferrell 2001; Roberts 1996). Participants had shopped for apparel 20 times, on average, in the last 12 months and had spent an average of \$1451 on apparel for themselves and \$704 on apparel for others. Participants had shopped for wool apparel 6 times, on average, in the past 12 months and had spent an average of \$398 on wool apparel for themselves and \$207 on wool apparel for others. Sixty percent of participants' last wool purchases were sweaters.

As noted earlier, participants were asked to write down any ethical, social and environmental issues they considered when purchasing wool apparel. The issues considered and the frequencies with which they were mentioned are shown in Figure 1. Labour/workers rights were most frequently mentioned (25% of the ethical issues raised). Labour/workers rights issues were specific, but not exclusive to the purchase of wool apparel as they included labour rights (e.g., 'My husband and I are concerned about buying apparel that is not produced in sweatshops, this applies equally to wool and all other materials'), fair compensation for workers (e.g., 'who makes them - fair, living wage?'), sweatshops (e.g., 'I care about how it is produced, i.e. 'I try not to purchase any material that is a result of unfair labour practices') and forced labour (e.g., 'no slave labour').

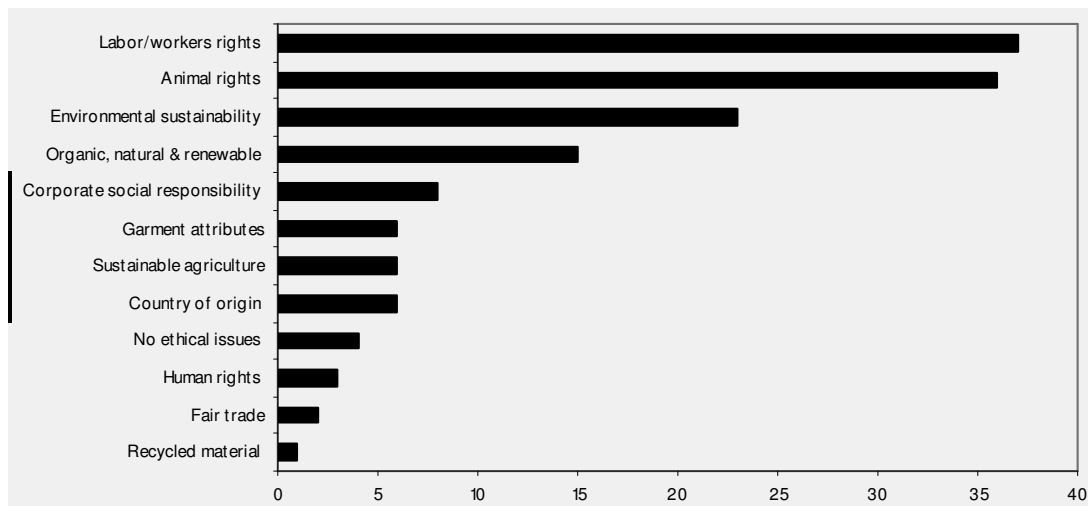


Figure 1: Frequency of ethical issues raised in the focus groups

Thirty-six (24%) animal welfare issues were mentioned, including general concerns about how animals (sheep) are treated (e.g., 'are sheep treated like animals or wool machines?'), living conditions (e.g., 'conditions for sheep whose wool is taken'), farming methods (e.g., 'factory farms – or whatever – safety of animals'), animal health and husbandry (e.g., 'I would hope that the wool that is shaved off the sheep is not too close to the skin so that the sheep does not get hurt. If the sheep gets nicked, I hope the sheep is cared for. The season for shearing, I hope, is not too cold for the sheep to bear the outside elements. After the sheep is sheared I hope there are sheltered areas for the animal to go'), and welfare and humane treatment (e.g., 'I really do not have a problem with purchasing or production part of the wool as long as sheep are treated humanely, meaning that they are not suffering'). None of participants mentioned animal welfare issues that are of concern to animal rights groups and the Australian wool industry such as mulesing and live sheep exports.

Twenty-three (16%) environmental sustainability issues were mentioned, including the use of chemicals in the treatment of wool, dyeing and dry-cleaning (e.g., 'dry cleaning isn't earth

friendly', 'environmental impacts of chemicals') and the negative impact of the transportation of wool products (e.g., 'environmental: distance it travels'). Fifteen (10%) positive ethical issues were mentioned when purchasing wool apparel, including describing wool apparel as 'organic', 'regenerative', 'ethical non-intrusive to animal welfare' and 'a friendly, renewable resource'. These cited positive attributes of wool production in terms of wool being a renewable and natural resource (e.g., 'wool is a natural fibre') and have no negative implications for sheep (e.g., 'sustainable to produce the wool the sheep is sheered and the animal is not hurt').

Discussion and Implications

Apparel consumers play a central role in ensuring an ethical clothing and textile industry through their product choices. This article explored the ethical issues that are of concern to self-identified ethical consumers when they make wool apparel decisions in light of environmental, animal welfare and labour issues raised by the industrialisation of the animal agricultural systems and the globalisation of clothing and textile production. The results make it clear the ethical issues that are of concern to consumers when they purchase wool apparel are numerous and complex.

The specificity of the labour rights issues raised in this study suggests participants were more concerned about these issues in the context of purchasing apparel than they were of animal welfare or environmental issues. This is not surprising as labour rights are a relatively mature social and ethical issue in the apparel industry (see Zadek 2004). Improvements in garment workers rights have been the target of social activism since the nineteenth century (Dickson, Loker & Eckman 2009). More recently, improved labour rights have been institutionalised in the global apparel industry through the introduction of universal agreements, such as the UN Global Compact (www.unglobalcompact.org), stakeholder engagement with organisations such as the Fair Labor Association and the adoption of 'codes of conduct' to integrate labour rights into core business strategies (Dickson, Loker & Eckman 2009).

In contrast to labour rights, environmental sustainability and animal welfare are relatively 'immature' ethical concerns in apparel consumption (Dickson, Loker & Eckman 2009; Hustvedt, Peterson & Chen 2008). The emerging nature of environmental sustainability concerns in the wool apparel context was reflected in the relatively low number of environmental issues raised by participants. Research undertaken by the Australian wool industry identified the positive environmental image of wool fibre (i.e. wool as a natural, renewable, biodegradable resource) as providing opportunities for marketing wool apparel to ethical consumers (The Woolmark Company 2006). However, in contrast to wool industry research, participants in this study appeared to be more concerned with labour rights and animal welfare than they were about the environmental sustainability of wool apparel.

These findings suggest animal welfare may be only emerging as an ethical issue in the apparel industry as, despite animal welfare issues being second most frequently mentioned by participants, a lack of understanding of the specifics of the welfare and treatment of sheep in wool production was evident. Although participants did not cite mulesing as an animal welfare concern, it is clear animal welfare in the wool industry is a major ethical concern for consumers and cannot be ignored by producers, manufacturers, marketers or industry policy makers seeking to meet the needs of the ethical consumer segment.

The study suggests the ethical consumer segment may be a promising market opportunity for the development of wool apparel products with positive social, environmental and animal

welfare attributes. Although the present findings may not be seen to support wool industry research, which focuses only on the positive environmental image of wool, it is a logical extension because people are not simply purchasing an agricultural product when they buy wool apparel; they are purchasing a garment made from farmed animal fibres that is manufactured in a complex global supply chain. The positive environmental image of wool apparel may be necessary to attract ethical consumers, but may not be enough to influence this segment's purchase behaviour as ethical issues, such as labour rights and animal welfare, need to be addressed.

If the wool industry targets the ethical consumer market it could communicate the ethical attributes of wool apparel through appropriate certification and labelling as these attributes are unobservable to consumers (The Woolmark Company 2006). The present findings suggest that more than one ethical issue needs to be included in the certification and labelling of wool apparel. This provides an opportunity for the wool industry to work with the global apparel industry to create standards that reflect a broad range of people's ethical concerns and create confidence in the authenticity of the apparel product and production standards. The current research indicates that apparel standards should address the humane treatment of animals, labour rights, fair trade and environmental, economic and social sustainability.

As little is known about how ethical consumers are likely to respond to such certification and labelling, additional research is needed. Future studies should use techniques, such as 'choice ordering', to explore ethical consumers' preferences for such certification and labelling and if such certification might allow producers to charge a premium price. Depending on the results of such future research, efforts might be aimed at increasing consumers' awareness of wool apparel and consumer's interest in the ethical attributes of wool apparel by providing useful and credible information on which consumers can base their purchase decisions. A better understanding of consumers' preferences for ethical wool apparel attributes should be of interest to marketers, advocates, educators and policy makers. Empowering consumers with the information will allow them to make purchase decisions based on their ethical concerns and preferences that are likely to generate satisfaction and ongoing loyalty towards wool as a garment fibre.

As with all research, there are limitations with this study. First, focus group participants were asked to self-select rather than being chosen using an objective measure of ethical consumerism. Although this approach offered the advantage of maintaining a broad view of ethical consumerism in the study, the use of an objective measure of ethical consumerism may provide greater confidence in ethical consumerism research outcomes. Second, this study did not examine how ethical concerns influence purchase intentions and behaviour. Therefore, further research is required to examine the extent to which ethical concerns influence intentions and wool apparel purchase behaviour.

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