The Branding of Ethical Fashion and the Consumer: A Luxury Niche or Mass-market Reality?

Abstract

This article seeks to address the branding and marketing of ecofashion or ethical fashion, juxtaposing the experiences of today's, often confused, fashion consumers, against the promotional methodologies used by, sometimes equally confused, fashion brands. Looking at the rise of ethical fashion, this article takes into consideration the factors that have influenced this. In addition, the lifestyle and societal indicators that effect consumer behavior in relation to purchasing ecofashion are also investigated. Further to this theoretical discussion, this article concludes with a reflection on today's practical manifestations of the branding and
promotion of ecofashion, and the challenges ahead that both fashion brands, and consumers, face in the continuation and sustainability of ecofashion.

KEYWORDS: ecofashion, ethical, branding, marketing, lifestyle, consumer

Introduction

In comparison to the food or cosmetics sectors, the fashion industry has, to an extent, been seemingly lackadaisical in its embrace of tackling dilemmas relating to the environmental and human costs of its impact on society. In part, this is because the average consumer has rarely questioned their practices before, with the result that very few fashion firms have felt it necessary to advertise from where they manufacture their products or source their fabric. This may perhaps be explained by the fact that while clothing has always been related very closely to matters of the body, it has not generally been related to health, since any detrimental effects of clothing to the body are less noticeable, or at least rarely acknowledged (Petit 2007). The result of this is that many large-scale commercial fashion firms have taken the lead from the large supermarket brands, such as Switzerland’s Coop, who have even gone as far as producing their own locally sourced line of organic knitwear (Brûlé 2008). While many of us are familiar with purchasing fruit with “Fair Trade” stickers on them, the true meaning of such branded emblems and terminology within the context of the fashion industry is not always transparent or understood. Yet, unlike supermarkets and food producers, however, as Kate Fletcher (2008) makes clear in her book Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys, the fashion industry chain of supply and manufacture is less transparent and much more complex than that for food. For example, an individual garment may make use of several fabrics, including interlinings, as well as zips, buttons, threads, and finishing techniques. In the context of the fashion industry, as Patrik Aspers (2006) explains, the difficulty is how all the suppliers of these individual components can be “ethically secured” and accounted for, together with the labor used to manufacture the garment, its transport from factory to retail outlet, and ultimately the garment’s aftercare and disposal.

This is the dilemma facing ethical fashion brands today. In an overcrowded fashion market, where a man’s suit can be bought for as little as £25.00 (O’Carroll 2007), how is it possible to capture the public’s imagination on ethical fashion, without becoming overzealously dictatorial, or indeed exploiting consumer’s anxieties unnecessarily? In an increasingly globalized, and transient world, it is the logos or brands, including those of fashion brands, that are sometimes the only thing that consumers are able to latch onto with any confidence, acting as
points of reference where the choice of availability is overwhelming. Consumers are, however, also wary of being misled. This is the challenge ecofashion brands face as they seek to position and brand themselves not only as ethically worthy, but increasingly as “fashionable,” not just to a niche audience, but to everyone. As ecofashion activist Katherine Hamnett asserts, for retailers and mainstream brands, ethical fashion has become “… an economic imperative, not just a moral one” (Hamnett in Brinton 2008).

This article juxtaposes the viewpoint and behavior of today’s consumers against the practical dilemmas and manifestations of how fashion brands promote their ethical credentials to the public. A brief insight into how associated lifestyle trends, such as the importance of “retro” (Guffey 2006) and the “liquid society” (Baumann 2005), underpin and influence many of these current practices and policies will also be investigated. In many ways the experience of the European fashion industry has been at the forefront of changes in learning to engage with ethical or ecofashion. In part, this is due to the great amount of restructuring that has occurred in clothing and textile manufacturing, as technologies have improved, and manufacturing has moved “offshore” to China and elsewhere. This has resulted in the EU’s clothing and textile manufacturing workforce being cut by a third (Sector Futures 2004). In reflection of this, while reference will be made to a variety of international fashion brands and organizations, the focus of this article is on the British and European experience of ecofashion within the context of the globalized fashion industry.

**The Consumer’s Conundrum**

In the Spring of 2007 two differing stories featured by the British press brought into focus the conundrum faced by today’s consumers of fashion. The accessories designer, Anya Hindmarch, best known for her “be-a-bag” line, and not previously aligned to the ethical fashion movement, launched a beige cotton bag emblazoned with the slogan: *I’m not a plastic bag.* The aim of this bag was to highlight the large amount of wasted plastic carrier bags that are used and discarded everyday in the UK, and to encourage consumers to rethink their habitual use of accepting a carrier bag at the supermarket or elsewhere (Caeser 2007). In contrast, Primark, a large multiple retailer and provider of very cheap, celebrity-inspired “fast-fashion,” captured the headlines after the opening of its new flagship store on London’s Oxford Street provoked a near riot (Santi 2007a; Watson 2007). What these two events demonstrated is that there is a polarization in behavior, amongst consumers, on the matter of ethical or ecofashion. Increasingly, consumers are concerned about the “ethical impact” their purchasing decisions have, both on the environment and on people. Importantly for fashion brands, they are
conscious that they should appear to be active in demonstrating this amongst their peers. In contrast, however, consumers are increasingly used to, and comfortable with, the availability of trend-led fashionable clothing that is extremely cheap, and where there is actually relatively little guilt felt about its disposability.

Perhaps this polarization in behavior, however, is understandable given the diverse use of the terms “ethical” and “eco” that fashion firms make use of in their branding and marketing initiatives. In the same way that cosmetic firms are often accused of “blinding” their customers with the “science” behind the alleged benefits of their products, the customer searching out “ecofashion” is similarly bombarded by claims purported by the advertising and promotional strategies of fashion brands. Such terms as “ethical,” “fair trade,” “organic,” “natural,” “sweat-shop free,” “recycled,” and even “second-hand” or “vintage” are used in persuading customers to believe that the fashion products they purchase are environmentally friendly and ethically sound. In relation to the branding and marketing of ecofashion, phraseology is perhaps one of the most important components in the interaction between the fashion brands and the consumers they serve. It is therefore pertinent to consider the terminology used by the fashion industry to promote “ethical” fashion. In many aspects, it is the use of phraseology in the debates surrounding ecofashion that is at the root of confusion, not only for fashion consumers, but also for the firms that wish to sell fashion items to them. Although there are several trade associations with schemes set up to monitor and encourage ethical practices amongst commercial firms, such as the Ethical Trading Initiative in the UK, Solidaridad and the Clean Clothes Campaign in the Netherlands, Fair Wear in Australia or the Fair Labor Association in the USA, there is no single organization or governmental body to regulate any specific “code of conduct” for the fashion industry. Instead, it remains up to individual consumers to navigate their way through the offerings of the fashion brands, deciphering for themselves which brands and products have genuine “green credentials,” from those that do not.

The Rise of Ethical Fashion and the Business of Ecofashion

It appears that the fashion industry as a whole is now coming of age, facing up to its responsibility to society and its place within it. Since its beginnings, and almost throughout its history, the industry of fashion, particularly clothing production, has been a tale associated with exploitation, of both resources and of people. What is new within society is the growing awareness over the last thirty years by consumers, generally, of the impact their consumption has in terms of the effects on both people and the environment. While the 1950s and 1960s was a period in
Europe of, perhaps understandable, acquisition of consumer goods and new technologies after the deprivations of World War Two, the 1970s was a more reflective period, with the embrace of “flower power” encouraging people to “drop out” of mainstream consumer society. While there was a backlash against this with the career- and asset-minded “Yuppies” (Young Upwardly Mobile Professionals) of the 1980s, there remained a core of people resistant to the ideals of pure and unregulated consumerism. Firms such as the Body Shop, established by Anita Roddick in 1976, emerged with a business strategy firmly rooted in the necessities of selling ethically inspired products that were accessibly priced for the average customer, yet at the same time promoted under a banner of being environmentally, and people, friendly.

In the Britain of the 1980s, consumerism became increasingly politicized, perhaps most obviously demonstrated through campaigns to prevent the testing of cosmetic products on animals. While Body Shop was one of the firms most widely associated with the Against Animal Testing campaign, it was perhaps the appropriation of glamorous fashion photography in advertising by the pressure group Lynx that captured the public’s attention in its quest to ban the use of fur. As Andrew Bolton (2004) attests:

Acting as a form of “guilt politics,” it urged women to reject fur in order to exhibit a morally as opposed to a materially superior status, thus giving birth to a new ideal of femininity, the moral or ethical woman.

Although Lynx failed to prevent the long-term continuation of using fur, as evidenced by its recent return to high fashion by designers such as Julien Macdonald, they succeeded in making the wearing of fur socially unacceptable to a wider audience, giving rise to the idea that being ethical could also be fashionable. Today, the RSPCA (Royal Society for the Protection of Animals) estimate that 70% of British consumers would not choose to wear fur (David Bowles in Cockcroft 2007). In order to compete in an already very overcrowded market, the creation of eco-fashion has emerged as another way for fashion brands to stand out. However, as Emberley (1998) makes clear:

The green marketplace can be as demanding as any other commodity system of exchange. High investments in media and advertising, along with the production of ecologically correct consumables, have contributed to an aesthetization of this expression of political justice …

In solution, there exist two differing scenarios. For fashion professionals starting out, there is the opportunity to build a business which is ethical from its inception, as brands such as Ciel or Enamore prove. For
existing fashion firms, and in particular, large multiples such as Marks & Spencer or the Arcadia Group, is the opportunity to look again at their current practices and procedures, and to decipher how it is possible to improve their product lines to encompass the principles of ecofashion. In each of these scenarios, all fashion brands have to balance the needs of growing and sustaining a healthy business, alongside accurately promoting their ecofashion products, encouraging consumers to alter their shopping habits. At the same time, they must also be careful not to overemphasize any politicized ethical message at the expense of alienating their customers, since nobody likes to be dictated to, or feel they must make a decision purely because it appears to be the “right” action to take.

**Incentives and Initiatives for Ecofashion Development**

The period 2006–2008 will perhaps be viewed by documenters of the future as the watershed phase when ecofashion changed from being a philanthropic niche to becoming a commercial reality. For instance, Marks & Spencer’s *Look behind the label* marketing campaign, highlighting its use of Fair Trade cotton and food products, has proved extremely beneficial, becoming its most successful consumer campaign ever (Attwood 2007). In 2005 £29 million alone was spent by British consumers on fair trade, organic clothing or recycled clothing, with a rise of an astonishing 79% in 2006, to £52 million (Ethical Consumerism Report 2007). The Soil Association also estimates that the British market for organic cotton products will more than double, from £45 million in 2006, to £105 million in 2008 (Ethical Consumerism Report 2007). This demonstrates that currently there is a significant niche market for ecofashion, and that it appears to be on an upward trajectory in terms of sales to be made. Although often aligned with the art field, the ultimate demonstration of a fashion brands success, even an ethical one, is its ability to produce a profit. Many of the smaller ecofashion brands purport to want to develop a sustainable business model, not only for themselves as retailers of fashion in Europe or the USA, but also to sustain the businesses of the textile producers and the factories where many of these products are made, in developing economies in Africa, Asia or Latin America.

Within the fashion industry there have been a number of initiatives to encourage these developments. In 2007, the UK Fashion Exports Awards established a new category, with its first Ethical Fashion Award, won by Sarah Ratty’s niche, high-end brand Ciel (www.ukfashionexports.com/apparel.htm). Since 2005, the RSPCA has held its own *Good Business Awards* scheme to encourage innovation and good practice on animal welfare issues amongst fashion and cosmetic firms.
Realizing it makes good business sense to be associated with the ecofashion movement, mainstream fashion multiple Monsoon/Accessorize has taken up sponsorship of Esthetica, London Fashion Week’s trade exhibition dedicated to ecofashion firms, now in its third season. Showcasing such brands as From Somewhere, Element 23, Veja, and Hetty Rose, curators Orsola de Castro and Filippo Ricci selected these brands on the basis that they manufacture and produce clothing that is either fair trade, organic or recycled (Press Release 2007). Conferences, film-screenings, and exhibitions on ecofashion, engaging both fashion professionals and members of the general public, also act as forums to showcase ethical fashion brands and as an opportunity to stimulate debate. Rebecca Earley’s curation of the exhibition Well Fashioned, held at the Crafts Council in 2006, highlighted the work of several smaller fashion brands and designers, with the aim of demonstrating to consumers how their actions are integral to the whole fashion cycle, from the inception of a garment until its demise. Interestingly, many established and up-market, ecofashion brands, such as People Tree and Katherine F. Hamnett, chose not to be included, as they felt such an exhibition was “not glamorous enough” (Earley 2006). In May 2007, the London College of Fashion hosted a week-long event Is Green the New Black?, encompassing the exhibition E-motive, in which many of these same brands, including Katherine E Hamnett, were also featured (Figure 1), highlighting how fast responses and attitudes even within the ethical fashion sector to promotional and educational ecofashion initiatives can change.

**Lifestyle and Society**

The desire by consumers to be viewed as responsible in their fashion purchases by their peers and society at large has historic precedents, with many seeking to limit their consumption of such seemingly frivolous items, including the nineteenth century’s Dress Reform movement (Arnold 2001; Maynard 2004). In the early twenty-first century, this desire by consumers to consider their fashion purchases within an ethical context may be viewed as a reaction against the late 1990s celebration of all things brash and ostentatious, as epitomized by the trend for must have “it” bags, such as Fendi’s Baguette. Increasingly, people are less confident in the future, or at least the future that is purported through television news items, featuring political and economic instability in the far-flung corners of the world. Individually, people are also questioning their place and purpose in a society that appears to be changing so rapidly, that it is difficult to determine the “right” direction of one’s own life path. Sociologist Zygmunt Baumann defines the society we find ourselves in today as the “liquid society,” such is its fluidity and uncertainty.

As a result, we are constantly in a state of flux, or at least feel that we are, in the decisions that we take, from choosing the right career path, to more mundane decisions, such as the brand of shampoo we should choose. In further support of this, Alain de Botton (2005) in his book *Status Anxiety* explains that part of the reasoning behind this are the greater levels of expectations we now have for the lives we lead and the ones we aspire to. In essence these expectations in Western society are concerned with the accumulation of goods, such as property, and
more pertinently, the social status enhancement of such items as exotic holidays, cars, MP3 players, and brand-label clothing. As de Botton further explains, this pursuit of monetary status is in reality a very narrow and one-sided view of the necessities required for the well-being of the individual.

The essence of the charge made against the modern high-status ideal is that it is guilty of a gigantic distortion of priorities, of elevating to the highest level of achievement a process of material accumulation which should be only one of the many things determining the direction of our lives under a more truthful, more broadly defined conception of ourselves (de Botton 2005).

In a Western society so focused on consumerism, where a greater majority of people are now satisfied with their overall standard of living, the focus for an increasing number of people is moving towards how to become more “rounded” as individuals, as we question our contribution, and impact, on society at large. Sociologist Paul Ray, together with psychologist Sherry Anderson, have completed a detailed study of these people, whom they define as “cultural creatives,” and who they estimate number 50 million people in the USA alone (Van Gelder 2001). This anxiety about the need to regulate our behavior in order to become “better people” in the way we live has manifested itself in nearly all aspects of our lives, in our homes, jobs and leisure activities. Once lagging behind countries such as The Netherlands and Denmark, many British householders now enthusiastically recycle their newspapers and plastics to avoid these being merely dumped in landfill sites that are fast becoming full. Wishing to seek out a better work-life balance, many people are seeking to “downsize” their responsibilities at work, looking at working part-time, home-working or even moving away from the big cities, such as London, to begin new lives and start new, less time-consuming, small businesses, in the countryside. Ethical sportswear brand Finisterre are an example of this, basing themselves in Cornwall (Balmond 2008), as are ethical fashion brand Howies, based in West Wales since 2001 (www.howies.co.uk/content.php?xId=498&xPg=1). Perhaps paradoxically, though, many of these modifications can best be viewed in our lives as consumers. The large crowds drawn to Borough Market, now a must-see site on London’s tourist trail (Figure 2) and the continuing growth of the annual Abergavenny Food Festival in Wales attest to the popularity of organic food and people’s desire to be seen to support local farmers and producers. For ethical fashion brands, new magazines such as Tonic and Sublime, which respectively advertise themselves as The Women’s Glossy with a Conscience and The First International Ethical Lifestyle Magazine, offer a new forum in which to showcase their products and also engage with a dedicated, niche readership in ethical issues, albeit viewed through a glamorous soft-focus lens.
Retro and Vintage, But Is It Ethical?

As a further antidote to the hectic "liquid life," filtering though nearly all facets of society today is an element of nostalgia for times past. In particular this has manifested itself through the work of designers, both within fashion and in other sectors, to produce "retro" products that feed into this nostalgic outlook and the wish to return to a life that is simpler and less anxious. As Elizabeth E. Guffey (2006) states: "Retro's translation of recent history into consumable objects suggests how previous periods of popular culture and art and design can be used to characterize ourselves as distinct from the recent past." Within fashion in particular, the production of retro outfits has manifested itself in the seemingly endless recycling and adaption of popular styles, prints or patterns from the 1920s, and subsequent decades onwards, up until almost the present day. As with consumer's choices on ethical fashion products in asserting their identity and affiliation with a particular lifestyle, "Retro can also describe an outlook on life ... More than a quest for a simpler life, this 'retro' attitude also carries a darker suspicion that recent social, cultural and political developments are profoundly corrosive" (Guffey 2006). For ethical fashion brands this idea of recent societal developments as corrosive or damaging, are particularly pertinent in the formulation of their own stance on where their products fit within the overall consumption cycle. As Sandy Black (2008) points out, many textile-led fashion firms working in Asia retain use of traditional skills, such as embroidery or weaving, combining a respect for
craftsmanship with the latest mass-technological production processes. This offers an alternative, yet commercially viable, platform in which these firms can promote their products, making their audience aware of both the intrinsic value of a garment not only well made, but also made ethically.

Coinciding with the consumer’s interest in ecofashion and combining it with the current taste for retro, there has also been a steady growth in the second-hand or vintage clothing market. Previously, second-hand clothing was the preserve of students or families on low incomes, unable to afford the higher-priced apparel found in mainstream stores. Over the last ten years, however, second-hand clothing has enjoyed a renaissance in its appeal. As Alexandra Palmer states: “Vintage has now shifted from subculture to mass culture because of the disappointing fact that, regardless of price, fashion today is rarely exclusive” (Palmer 2005). Rather than being found in dusty stores in suburban areas or markets, second-hand clothing has been rebranded from being “second-hand,” to be sold as “vintage” in shops found in the quirkier corners of the big cities. Shops such as Bang Bang in London, Lisa Larsson in Stockholm, or Espace Killiwatch in Paris cater to consumers willing to pay a premium for a dress or a jacket, perhaps by a fabled designer such as Christobal Balenciaga or Emilio Pucci, knowing full well, they are unlikely ever to bump into anyone else wearing the same one. It is this cache, the ownership of a one-of-a-kind piece, which has brought about a shift in what constitutes “exclusive” in a fashion sense. As Palmer further emphasizes: “The smart consumer can attain the status of a connoisseur, an achievement that mitigates against established associations of fashion consumption with irrational and hysterical feminine traits” (Palmer 2005). In the same way that a wealthy businessman may collect paintings or fine wine, it is now possible, and indeed encouraged, to collect fashion, such as pieces made with antique lace, or original 1960s dresses made by Biba, without any hint of self-consciousness. Although as Lars Svendsen (2006) purports “…fashion has become more democratic-but it has not become egalitarian,” as the wearing of vintage, and indeed ecofashion clothing, has become a new way of demonstrating sartorial superiority. Indeed, for the consumer, “vintage” and “ethical” are seemingly synonymous; after all, recycling a garment by passing it on for resale in a second-hand clothing shop appears to be a practical solution. Gaining a new, stylish and unique item, at the same time reducing the consumption of a “new” clothing item, answers the ethical and sartorial dilemmas of the eco-conscious customer. This is, however, not so clear cut, as often second-hand clothing items need to be dry-cleaned, necessitating the use of chemicals, which may negate the “ethical” element of such a purchase in other ways. As Rebecca Earley demonstrated in her Well Fashioned exhibition in 2006, and as both Kate Fletcher (2008) and Dr Dorothy Maxwell, of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (2008), make clear, it is
the aftercare aspect of clothing that has the most demonstrable negative impact on the environment as a whole.

**Authenticity and Transparency**

As an industry as a whole, fashion exists as a system for social regulation and social pressure (Lipovetsky 1994), which means that where one firm takes the lead in one area, many others will follow. In terms of eco-fashion, the pressure to be authentic and transparent is co-dependent, between smaller, pioneering designers such as Ciel and larger retailers such as Marks & Spencer, and the consumers they serve. To use the terminology of Stephen Bertman, in our “nowist” and “hurried” culture (Bertman in Baumann 2007) the importance of authenticity for consumers is becoming an increasingly essential component as they seek out products and brands that meet their expectations and aspirations. For ethical fashion firms, the ability to prove their credentials in this area, such as the sourcing and manufacture of their products, is extremely relevant to their positioning within the overall fashion industry. As has been highlighted in recent press coverage on large firms such as Topshop (Roberts 2007) and Gap (McDougall 2007), concerning their apparent lack of stringency over the conditions in which some of their clothing is manufactured, the necessity of transparency in business practice continues to be important, not only as a means of short-term damage limitation in a public relations sense, but as a long-term sustainable economic proposition. Commenting on the embrace of fair trade by commercial fashion firms, Sean Pilot de Chenecey, of the trend forecast agency Captain Crikey, makes the point that:

... the big issue of today is provenance—consumers want to know when, where and how product is sourced. Shoppers will vote with their wallets and we're not talking about a niche market anymore. Consumers are socially aware across every demographic now (Pilot de Chenecey in Santi 2006).

In positioning themselves as “ethical,” however, fashion brands need to ensure their practices and procedures go beyond mere aesthetics in terms of marketing and branding. Instead, these practices need to be integrated and demonstrated to all involved in the firm, whether employees, suppliers, shareholders or customers, as Nicholas Ind asserts that:

... business can be a force for evil, but it can also be a force for good. Brands can enrich people’s lives or manipulate them. Employees can find fulfilment at work or entrapment. The task is to create a culture and system where the focus is more consistently focused and positive (Ind 2003).
Particularly within the area of ethical fashion, it is the passion and dedication of the founder of the brand, or a number of individuals within a larger firm, who implement the principles and ethos of ecofashion. It is also up to these same individuals, however, to ensure that the message of ethical authenticity is carried out in a manner that is clear-headed and transparent. Otherwise, the potential to lose current consumer enthusiasm, and indeed trust, for ecofashion is a very real possibility.

Eco-marketing: Slogans, Advertising, and Public Relations

For the wary consumer labels such as “fair trade” and “organic” are no guarantee of the actual quality of the garment they are buying, in terms of either fabric or manufacture. For this reason, many firms are cautious about their use of such terminology, and so instead have taken to inventing their own. Abigail Petit, founder of the Gossypium label, prefers to market her collection of lounge wear under the slogan of “Pure and Fair” (Petit 2007), to emphasize both the fineness of the cotton used and the treatment of the farmers Gossypium works with in India. Shoemaker, Beyond Skin, makes use of the phrase “cruelty-free” to emphasize the animal-friendliness of its line of “vegetarian shoes” made with polyurethane (PU), a man-made substitute for PVC and leather (www.beyondskin.co.uk). While it is understandable that these firms wish to distance themselves from other, perhaps less ethically orientated, fashion brands, it is possible that this creates another layer of potentially confusing terminology for consumers to decipher. For example, Los-Angeles-based designer Linda Loudermilk has devised and trademarked her own “Luxury Eco Stamp of Approval” certification label (www.lindaloudermilk.com/stamp.html, www.luxuryecostampofapproval.com/index.html). Although other firms can apply for their own products to be certified with this stamp, this particular emblem is company specific, and is not yet recognized as an “official” ecofashion guarantee by the wider international fashion industry or by any governmental organization.

Marks & Spencer, the traditional cornerstone of the British fashion retail market, has been successful in raising awareness of its commitment to ecofashion, due to its extensive use of advertising in the printed press. It can perhaps be claimed that no one with access to the media in Britain can now be ignorant of its Plan A, a manifesto for working towards creating a more ethically sound fashion business (www.marksandspencer.com). For the smaller and more recently established ecofashion firms, the high cost of such advertising is prohibitive. Only online retailer Adili currently appears to advertise regularly in both mainstream and specialized ethical magazines. Instead many of these labels, such as The House of Hemp, Junky Styling, Enamore, and Ciel,
rely on generating editorial coverage through their own in-house public relations initiatives. While specialist magazines such as Organic Life, New Consumer and The Ecologist remain important to promoting eco-fashion to a niche group of already converted consumers, in broadening this customer base, the non-specialized national and local media have made a significant contribution in offering a forum to promote eco-fashion. Nearly every major national newspaper in the UK now has a dedicated “ethical” columnist or section, such as the Eco-Worrier column that appears every Saturday in The Times. Several other magazines and newspaper supplements have brought out dedicated eco-fashion editions, such as mainstream fashion lifestyle magazine New Woman, who invited its readers to discover their own “eco-slut within” (New Woman 2006), highlighting how far the media’s perception of eco-fashion has come from its past associations with brown rice and open-toed sandals (Figure 3).

**Ecofashion and Celebrity**

As part of a discussion held during the week-long event Is Green the New Black?, held at the London College of Fashion in May 2007, Elizabeth Laskar of the Ethical Fashion Forum, commented that at present there is no single figurehead, such as a top Hollywood film actress or pop-star, to represent the cause of eco-fashion (Beard 2007). Although there are examples of famous names attached to the eco-fashion debate, such as the Soil Association’s hiring of the television presenter Donna
Air as its public “face” (Millard 2006), and Stella McCartney as the head of her own namesake fashion brand, the use of celebrity as a promotional tool is highly relevant, yet also potentially encumbered, within the ecofashion context. The use of a famous named celebrity has the advantage that it is easier for consumers to identify with a personality affiliated to a particular lifestyle. This is why it has become such a popular device within fashion advertising, such as the recent appearance of Scarlett Johansen in the advertising of Louis Vuitton. In the case of the ecofashion debate, any brand wishing to hire a celebrity as a mouthpiece to promote their brand, would need to choose carefully, however, as there is the danger that: “Even saying a few carefully chosen words on a single, poignant issue carries risks” (Cashmore 2006). This is particularly the case if the celebrity happens to be exposed to contradict the ecofashion message in any way by Britain’s virulent tabloid press. In this, ecofashion brands may learn from the example of PETA, who in the mid-1990s photographed several famous supermodels in the nude, including Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell, for their advertising campaign to highlight their anti-fur message under the slogan; We’d rather go naked than wear fur. When the trend for luxurious and extravagant clothing inspired by the confidence of the hip-hop music scene emerged in the early twenty-first century, wearing fur again became acceptable, and both Crawford and Campbell were happy to re-embrace wearing fur for advertising campaigns or on the catwalk in Paris (Freeman 2006).

**Eco-shopping—On and Offline**

In the absence of an iconic actress or model, there are several other methods that ecofashion brands use to promote their message. For many fashion brands the shop is perhaps the most powerful marketing tool of all. Brands including Howies, People Tree, Gossypium, and Terra Plana have all established their own retail stores (Figure 4). The advantage of this strategy is that the brand itself has complete control over the environment in which their product is sold, enabling the customer to become fully engaged in the brands ethos and product range. In turn, the store acts as an important testing ground for the brand, not only in testing new products, but also to encourage feedback from the customer direct. As eco-orientated cosmetic firms Body Shop, Lush, Liz Earle, and Nude have found, the best way to inform people about your product is to encourage them to try it out. According to Abigail Petit (2007), it was listening to the customers in-store that has made her brand Gossypium what is today. For mainstream brands with an already established network of stores, such as Marks & Spencer or New Look, they are able to introduce ecofashion lines alongside their existing ones, or to establish separate areas for dedicated ecofashion apparel. Arcadia-owned
Topshop, for instance, opened a concession area for the People Tree brand in 2006 (www.peopletree.co.uk/shownews.php?id=92).

For smaller niche firms, and ecofashion start-up companies, it is perhaps the Internet that has been most useful in facilitating the promotion and exposure of their fledgling brands. Nearly all the ecofashion brands referenced in this article have a website, where it is utilized as a point of contact and promotional vehicle, such as the sites for Edun, Kuyichi, Fin, Loomstate Jeans, Ciel, Noir, and Stella McCartney. More often, ecofashion firms use their websites as fully functioning online stores for the purchase of ecofashion products by customers all over the world. These include the brands Beyond Skin, Terra Plana, Howies, Gossypium, People Tree, Katherine E Hamnett, American Apparel,
Matt & Nat, and Adili. In researching these ecofashion outlets, however, it is apparent that many tend to concentrate on producing casual clothing, such as jeans and T-shirts. In part, this may be explained by the relative ease with which such items may be manufactured, and remain everyday basic items that the average fashion consumer can easily fit into their existing wardrobes. In Europe, despite the relaxation in dress codes generally, many people are still expected to wear quite formal clothing, such as a suit, for work. To gain further acceptance as to the relevance of their product, it will be a challenge for many ecofashion brands to develop clothing that can be worn in a more formal setting, such as a client meeting or job interview. Aside from such firms as Stella McCartney and Ciel in the UK, Noir in Denmark, Fin in Norway or Linda Loudermilk in the USA, there are relatively few ecofashion brands who embrace the more luxurious, and indeed, fashion-led end of the market. Perhaps People Tree's recent hiring of Jane Shepardson, formerly of Topshop, as a consultant to inject a greater "fashion" element into their collections (www.peopletree.co.uk/shownews.php?id=95), and also their collaborations with up-coming designers such as Thakoon, Boru Aksu, and Richard Nicoll (www.peopletree.co.uk/ss08designercollaboration.php), leads the way to how ecofashion brands may work towards this.

**Conclusion—The Challenges Ahead**

Ecofashion firms face the same challenges as non-specialized fashion firms. Yet in an era where authenticity and transparency is expected of commercial firms by the general public, niche, start-up ecofashion brands perhaps have the advantage. Rather than disappearing, this need for clarity and social responsibility is less a short-lived fad, than an economic reality. The lesson for ecofashion brands to remember, however, is to set forward a business strategy that is both realistic and achievable. Fin, in Norway, claims to be not only the first totally ethical fashion brand, it also declares itself to be the only carbon-neutral fashion brand (www.finosl.com). While this is admirable, firms such as Fin need to be aware that the all-important fashion media will be very quick to desert any ecofashion brand that breaks its promise. In Fall 2007, Katherine Hamnett announced she was to terminate her contract with the Tesco supermarket chain to distribute her *Choose Love* range of ethical clothing, commenting that: "...I've come to the conclusion that it [Tesco] simply wants to appear ethical, rather than make a full commitment to the range" (Hamnett in Santi 2007b). For larger, mainstream firms this case highlights the need to publically support ecofashion, ensuring they are integrating practices that answer genuine ethical concerns, and not merely attaching themselves to the ecofashion "band-wagon" in the hope of attracting short-term publicity. While for niche ecofashion brands this
offers a reminder that even ethical initiatives need to be kept within the bounds of a reality that is both long-term and genuinely sustainable.

For ecofashion brands, the litmus test in the continuing production and consumption of ecofashion remains the same as for less ethical brands: the need and sustainable means to make money. What all fashion brands need to remember, however, is the need for clarity and transparency in all areas of their business. This is especially important in terms of their marketing and branding initiatives, as this is the main interface a firm has between itself and its customers, which can take the form of shops, websites, advertising, and public relations. This is necessary to maintain the customers trust in the fashion brand. The hectic environment of twenty-first-century living between work, home responsibilities, and leisure, leaves little time for the average consumer to decipher what is genuinely ethical from what is not. This is where the burden of responsibility for the ecofashion brand lies, in its ability to promote and engage its audience with a clear and simple message that is tangible and exciting, yet devoid of confusing jargon. Returning to the example of Anya Hindmarch, as used in the introduction, while her I am not a plastic bag initiative was an admirable instance of bringing into focus the concept of ecofashion in an enticing way before a new audience, it also highlights how open to confusion and misunderstanding such activities are by consumers, and perhaps damaging to the ethical fashion movement as a whole.

Ultimately, however, the continuation of ethical fashion lies with the people engaged within it. Educational initiatives, such as the establishment of an MA in Ethical Fashion by the University of the Creative Arts (www.ucreative.ac.uk/index.cfm?articleid=14235), aims to ensure that future generations of fashion professionals and decision makers develop a prolonged passion for ecofashion to take with them into the industry. With The Guardian newspaper diversifying into opening its own online eco-shop in association with Natural Collection (Gibbs 2007), the media’s embrace of ethical trading is perhaps now complete. Despite the plethora of casual eco-clothing ranges now available, ecofashion remains a niche market, and does not yet reflect the broad scope of people’s lifestyles. Increasingly, and in the very near future, being branded and marketed as ethical will no longer be enough, as niche ecofashion firms will need to inject a greater stylishness into their collections in order to meet their customers’ needs, not only casual wear for lounging in, but also formal work wear, or perhaps a slinky cocktail dress for a Saturday night. As Jane Shepherdson, consultant to People Tree and Oxfam, suggests:

Guilt doesn’t drive change, desire does. If you want someone to buy a Fair Trade dress, then make sure it looks absolutely gorgeous. You can’t expect people to do it altruistically, because they
won’t. It needs to be stylish first, and the ethical part needs to be added value, as in “Oh, it’s ethical too—perfect” (Shepherdson in Brinton 2008).

This is necessary if ecofashion is to develop and grow, to move from being an occasional choice of the few prepared to pay a premium price, to becoming the everyday habit of everyone.

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