

GREEN IN FASHION?

An exploratory study of national differences in consumers concern for eco-fashion

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ABSTRACT

The world undergoes one of the worst economic crises ever, which affects all industries, including fashion and luxury. Experts tend to say that understatement, stealth wealth and non-conspicuous consumption are becoming implicit rules. Consequently, some consumers might select new forms of status display, via philanthropic or environmental-friendly actions. In addition, consumers might feel a need to refocus on what is really important in their lives, especially their health via reconnecting with nature. Hence, the new economic context tends to encourage the trend to go green in many industries and fashion brands begin to pick up the interest. Diesel launched a Global Warming Ready Collection. Stella McCartney is one of the well-known designers who are pushing this trend to the forefront, helping it trickle down to high street in Great-Britain. In the rest of Europe, the trend is emerging based on the success of organic food. Yet, not much is known on how consumers evaluate the fit of “green” with fashion. In addition, the scarce number of studies on ethical fashion has focused mainly on fair trade and does not take into consideration variability between nations.

In order to understand the perceptions of consumers, a set of studies were conducted with participants from different cultures (focus groups and in-depth interviews) and samples originating from France and Canada (120 respondents in total) . It appears that the interest in purchasing organic fashion is moderate, although slightly higher in our Canadian sample, with no significant difference between genders. Overall, there appears to be a lack of awareness and trust that calls for more information on the nature and certification procedures of green fashion.

The first three reasons that would motivate the purchase of organic clothes are, in order, environmental-friendly reasons, health concerns and ethical concerns. Nonetheless, expressing social status is evoked more in the French sample and self-expression in the Canadian one. Main differences also appear in the appeal of green fashion. For European respondents, organic fashion is lacking glamour dramatically. The typical consumer portrayed by the participants is a very simple woman in her 40's, wealthy yet not sophisticated in her tastes. For North American respondents, the typical green fashion consumer is young, sexy, trendy and self-confident. This difference of perception seems linked to the diffusion of organic brands in the respective countries under study.

Overall, if consumers are ready to pay a premium to purchase organic food, they do not see the interest yet in organic fashion. There is a need to inform better the consumers on the nature of organic fashion and to continue “glamorizing” both the communication and the products.

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Across the world, a growing segment of consumers are seeking ethical or environmentally friendly products (Kaufman, 1999; Montoro et al., 2006; Phau & Ong, 2007), which range from organically grown product, to hairsprays, paper and in more recent times clothing (Connolly & Prothero, 2003). For long, fashion and environmental concerns seemed to be conflicting concepts, the first one implying products with short lifecycles when the second one promotes durability, sustainability and the reuse of products. Yet, a whole industry has flourished around a number of brands devoted to being green such as Veja or Patagonia and brands launching eco-collections such as H&M, Zara or designers such as Marc Jacobs or Stella McCartney. Ironically, supply seems to precede demand in the eco-fashion industry (Fineman, 2001). Consequently, researches have been concentrating more on the supply and manufacturing side of eco-fashion than on consumers' side. In addition, the scarce number of researches that studied the green fashion consumer has lead to inconsistent results (Butler and Francis, 1997). Last, there seems to be different levels of acceptance of eco-fashion between countries within Europe itself and between European and North America countries. However, cross-cultural comparisons on ethical issues have mostly concerned consumers' misbehaviors and fair trade issues (Newholm and Shaw, 2007). Little is known on cross-cultural similarities and differences in green attitudes and behaviors. Newholm and Shaw (2007) call for the study of ethical consumption patterns across cultures. This paper is a first attempt to explore the perception of and interest in eco-fashion from a cross-national perspective.

Eco what?

First, there seems to be a foggy understanding of what is “eco-fashion” as a variety of terms have been used such as ethical, organic, green, fairtrade, sustainable, recycled, re-used, eco etc. Words seem to be interchangeable although they have different meanings. Moreover, the fact that these words are used extensively and in different contexts frequently unrelated risks making them meaningless. It appears that the eco-fashion industry needs to formalize better boundaries, norms and regulations. Recently, Mintel (2009), a UK market research company, proposed the following definitions in order to clarify the distinct concepts included in the overall umbrella term of “ethical fashion”: *“**Ethical clothing** refers to clothing that takes into consideration the impact of production and trade on the environment and on the people behind the clothes we wear. **Eco clothing** refers to all clothing that has been manufactured using environmentally friendly processes. It includes organic textiles and sustainable materials such as hemp and non-textiles such as bamboo or recycled plastic bottles. It also includes recycled products (clothes made from **recycled clothing** including vintage, textile and other materials and can also be termed **re-used**) and is not necessarily made from organic fibres. **Organic clothing** means clothes that have been made with a minimum use of chemicals and with minimum damage to the environment and **fairtrade** is intended to achieve better prices, decent working conditions, local sustainability and fair terms for farmers and workers in the developing world”*. (Mintel, 2009). **Green**, for its part refers mainly to the environmental effects of textile processing and consumption of clothing (Phau & Ong, 2007). With reference to labels, the Australian Ecolabel Program, the European Union official eco-label and the US Green Seal label are all summarily united under the Global Ecolabelling Network. Trade or verification bodies are contingent to particular countries, but at an international level, a global network of organizations exists such as the International Fairtrade Association (IFAT) and the Global Organic Textile Standards (GOTS).

However, the above definitions and distinctions between the different strands of ethical fashion have not filtered down yet to mainstream consumers (Intel, 2009) or even to the wider academic body of literature.

The research which is published around the context of the fashion business can also blur the lines of understanding further what is ethical and eco-fashion. Skov (2009) introduces the notion of ethics in the fashion industry which includes areas such as body and gender images, fakes and animal rights alongside ethical issues concerned with production and consumption issues as defined above such as labour conditions, the effect on the environment and the discarding habits of consumers once the garment no longer serves its purpose. Pretious and Love (2006) on the other hand, explore the effect of the development of ethical codes of conduct for UK retailers. With the global negative publicity which companies such as Nike and Gap have suffered in the past due to their alleged ethical misconduct, ethical standards have an influence on customers' perception of brands and retailers and by inference on sales levels.

The scarce numbers of studies which have attempted to measure consumers attitude toward eco-fashion tend to show a neutral or indifferent attitude (Butler and Francis, 1997). Yet, most studies are not recent and were conducted in the US. As noticed by a number of researchers around the world, the green consumer is no longer a niche target (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Finisterra do Paco et al., 2009). Environmental concerns translate into preferences for eco-friendly products, especially for food and cars (Finistera do Paco et al., 2009). In the United Kingdom, researches show that at comparable price and performance, consumers would rather purchase a green product and fashion does not seem ignored by this eco-preference (Intel, 2009). As with many trends, young people seem to lead the way to ethical behaviors in fashion by rejecting animal furs. They are also promoting an eco-chic lifestyle, which corresponds to the emergence of new forms of status-display via philanthropic

or environmental-friendly actions under the pressure of the economic crisis. As stated in The Independent (2008) “*We used to spend our money showing people how much money we have got; now we are spending our money on supporting our moral concerns*”. This new motivation for moral expression might even override the traditional environmental concerns and be more heavily weighted at times of purchase. Indeed, many researchers notice that although consumers mention the protection of the environment as an important factor of choice for fashion items, they do not take this criterion in consideration when in a purchasing context. Ultimately, an eco-fashion item is a fashion item, which implies price and style as determinant choice criteria (Butler and Francis, 1997).

Eco who?

Overall, attempts to portray the green fashion consumer have been unfruitful. Foster (2004) suggests that the over 45 years old consumers have a tendency to be more open towards ethical information. Yet, many studies found no significant correlation between age and a green orientation (see Finisterra do Paco et al., 2009). Results are also inconsistent in terms of gender differences. Several studies found that women are more concerned by green issues than men and are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviors (Zelezny et al., 2000). This gender difference seems to emerge also in the youngest group of population and in a cross-cultural context (Beutel and Johnson, 2004). Yet, recently, qualitative and quantitative results found by Gronhoj and Olander (2007) do not support the existence of such a difference. Results are more consistent in terms of education and income. The green consumer is considered more educated and wealthier than the average consumer (Shim, 1995). Mintel (2009) also mentions that those with a higher education are more prone to take into account ethical information regarding a company or a brand when they are in a purchase

situation. In Portugal, Finisterra do paco et al. (2009) made a typology of green consumers based on demographics. Three groups emerged: the “green activists” composed of people with the highest levels of education; the “undefined” group composed of people with lowest education levels and the “uncommitted” composed of the youngest people (aged 18-34). The first group, with highest level of education, is the only one claiming positive attitudes toward environmental aspects. Yet, there appears to be a democratization of green purchasing in Europe and North America. Indeed, Laroche et al. (2001) found that there is a group of consumers which transcends the socio-economic boundaries and is willing to pay for the ethical credentials.

Cross-culturally, differences are mentioned in the development and supply of fair trade products in Northern and Southern Europe (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). Yet, in terms of consumers’ interest for environmental issues, there seems to be a similar lack of concern across Asia, Europe and North America (Belk et al, 2005).

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In order to understand the perception of consumers regarding green / eco fashion products, a set of studies (qualitative and surveys) were conducted with European and North American citizens. The method and results of these studies are described in the following sections.

Qualitative research

Method

Two focus groups were organized in Monte Carlo (with Continental European students) and in Canada (with North American students). The European group was composed

of seven students, three male and four women. This group was very diverse in terms of nationality, with two Bulgarians, one German, two Swedish, one Czech and one Italian. The ages of the participants were between 19 and 26 years old. The North America group was composed of eight students, with same number of male and women, and five Canadian citizens, the rest being US citizens. The age bracket was similar to the European group. All students were studying business and administration at university level.

These focus groups were completed with six in-depth interviews of women in their 40s, two Italian, two French and two Canadian, with a higher than average income and a graduate level of education.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in English. They used the same guidelines except for the European focus group which included in addition to the set of questions two projective techniques (mood boards/collage and DAP).

Main results for both techniques (focus groups and in-depth interviews) are described aggregated to ease understanding. Names are changed to respect the anonymity of participants.

Results

Both for European and North American respondents, the concept of “green fashion” is not clear. The majority of participants refers to eco-friendly products but wonder how products adhere to the eco-friendly procedures. It is understood that the raw material is organic and produced in perfect accordance with the protection of the environment. But questions rise on the manufacturing process per se. Respondents wonder if some clear and formalized norms exist and have to be followed for the products to be considered green. In

addition, the boundaries are not always clear related to other trends such as fair trade, ethical fashion, and the use of recycled materials. Most participants are not aware of the existence of green fashion alternatives to traditional fashion in their own countries.

“I understand that it respects the environment... but what does that mean exactly? Not sure” (Jenny, 20, Canadian)

“The material, the linen, cotton, etc. is organic. I am not sure if it is enough to be considered green. What about assembling, sewing etc. ” (Ana, 46, Italian)

“The trend is going in the direction of fair trade products. I think green are also considered ethical. Or is it totally different? ” (Clara, 42, Canadian)

Another issue which emerged very strongly on both sides of the Atlantic was trust. Indeed, the lack of knowledge probably due to a lack of information engenders suspicion, especially when the brands claiming green origin are not famous. Participants do not know if the raw material and / or the manufactured items are certified by external agencies, and what these agencies are worth.

“It is more expensive to purchase organic products. I want to be 100% sure I am not misled” (Jules, 23, German)

“I feel that they say this is an organic t-shirt, I don't always believe it, to what extent it is actually a green shirt. I just have the feeling they put a label organic. It is marketing. Or maybe one aspect is truly organic. But in fact in the manufacturing process, they do not respect the environment. They pollute the water when tainting”. (Mia, 22, Swedish)

Making the parallel with green/organic food, participants all agree on green fashion being healthier, especially for those suffering of allergies or with a sensitive skin. Naturally, women in their 40's mention that they would essentially purchase these products for their kids, especially for babies.

“I try to purchase organic for my baby, especially organic food and diapers. But when I see baby clothes in organic cotton, I also purchase some nice items. There are more and more.” (Laura, 41, France)

The main difference we found between North America and Continental Europe was on the appeal of such eco-fashion items. In Europe, both in the verbatim as well as in the images associated with green fashion, the imagery is not appetizing, not glamorous at all. The world of green fashion is painted in dull colors, brown, grey, white. No luxurious materials (such as silk) are evoked. Green fashion is rather associated with (hairy) wool. No particular brands are spontaneously associated by the majority, except for Marks and Spencer for a couple of students. The typical woman portrayed is in her 40’s, down-to-earth, old fashioned, with a bad taste. She has a simple yet healthy lifestyle. For some, she is a “peace and love” activist.

“The first thing I think about when hearing green fashion is something dull”. (Jules, 23, Germany)

“The style is awful. Maybe if they could improve the style.... Away from potato bags....yet, organic clothes for babies and kids are cute, really cute. I purchased many items for my kids” (Sonia, 47, Italy)

European participants also tend to associate organic with status. Because organic products are more expensive than non organic, respondents think it is a form of showing-off. It is the ultimate luxury for those who can afford to pay the price. The latest form of conspicuous consumption.

“If the price is high, then status will be there” (Lisa, 22, Bulgaria)

“It may be easy to show you purchased a green car yet showing that one wears organic clothes is not easy... Brands make a statement for this reason. An example which comes to my mind :I am not a plastic bag” (Mia, 22, Swedish)

“It is in. Now people with money eat organic, dress organic, drive organic, and sleep organic in their house equipped with solar systems. One does not talk about brands anymore in social dinners. Discussions are around photovoltaic systems and the new organic supermarket next door.” (Laura, 41, France)

For North American participants, on the contrary, wearing organic fashion is trendy, young and sexy. They associate with green fashion a woman in her 20's, simple but sexy, with All Stars organic basket shoes, a pair of organic blue jeans and a white organic cotton Marcel tee-shirt. She is healthy and not sophisticated, with a unique urban contemporary style. She is self-confident and expresses herself through her fashion choices. They do not think that organic fashion is more expensive, just that it is less available. The student group associates many fashion brands such as H&M, American Apparel and Urban Outfitters with green fashion. Women in their 40's think it is a trend which originates from the UK. They imagine very stylish designs in linen and cotton. They essentially mention Stella McCartney as the leading warrior of this trend. They also suggest that the image of Calvin Klein fits with the organic trend.

"It is natural to go toward more organic. It has to be. We cannot go on damaging the planet forever."

(Kate, 24, Canadian)

"It is cool and sexy. The American Apparel style." *(Kevin, 22, Canadian)*

"Just came back from UK. Super hip to wear organic. Stella McCartney is everywhere. Recycled materials too." *(Pamela, 41, American)*

Survey

Method

Sample. 120 respondents were recruited on a convenience basis, half in France and half in Canada, 70 women and 50 men. Both groups were perfectly matched on age (the French group mean= 29.8, SD 10.9 and the Canadian group mean= 32.6, SD 10.2, $F(1,118)= 2.17$, $p=.14$) and on gender ($X^2(1)=.55$, $p=.45$). In both groups, the level of education was higher than average; 2/3 of respondents had an undergraduate degree and 1/3 a graduate

degree. All respondents had higher than average level in English. In addition, respondents in both groups were equally “interested in fashion” (overall mean 5.01, SD 1.44, $F(1,118)=.04$, $p=.85$).

Measures. The questionnaire was short and administered in English. After demographics, respondents had to rate their intention to purchase organic fashion in the near future on a 7 point scale anchored by “not at all” to “extremely likely”. Next, they had to rank from 1 to 9 a number of propositions corresponding to the reasons that would motivate such a purchase. Propositions were based on the verbatim extracted from the focus groups: “It is more durable”; “I express my unique tastes, different from the crowd”; “It is better for my health”; “I contribute to the protection of the earth”; “It shows my social status”; “It fits with my ethical concerns”; “It is trendy”; “It has a unique style/design”; other. Next, respondents had to evaluate the typical purchaser of organic fashion on a list of 15 adjectives extracted from the focus groups.

Results

Intention to purchase organic fashion. Overall, the intention to purchase organic fashion is moderate (mean= 4.4, SD 1.6). There is no significant correlation between age and the intention to purchase organic fashion (Pearson correlation 0.06, $p=.52$). Yet, there is a significant positive correlation between the interest of respondents in fashion and their intention to purchase eco-fashion (Pearson correlation = .39, $p=.00$). A Univariate Analysis of Variance with origin and gender as fixed factors demonstrate no difference on gender yet a difference on origin. Respondents from the Canadian sample are more likely to purchase organic than their French counterparts (respectively, mean 4.7 SD 1.6 vs. 4.0 SD 1.5, $F(1,116)= 6.8$, $p=.01$). There is no interaction effect.

Motivations to purchase organic fashion. As one will notice in the graph below, it appears that the three best ranked motivations are: concerns with environment protection, health and ethics. These three motivations are winners in both samples. Yet, differences appear between samples on a number of variables. First, organic fashion being healthier is more a concern for the French sample than for the Canadian one (respectively mean= 2.9 vs. 3.9, Kolmogorov-Smirnov nonparametric $z = 1.55$, $p = .01$). Expressing a social status with the purchase of organic fashion is also better ranked in the French sample compared to the Canadian (mean = 4.5 vs. 6.5, K-S non parametric test = 2.37, $p = .00$). On the other hand, expressing different tastes and ethical concerns (K-S non parametric test = 1.64, $p = 0.01$) are significantly better ranked in the Canadian sample compared to the French one (mean= 4.1 vs. 5.6, K-S non parametric test = 1.37, $p = .05$ for self-expression and mean= 2.9 vs. 4.0, K-S non parametric test = 1.64, $p = 0.01$ for ethical concerns).

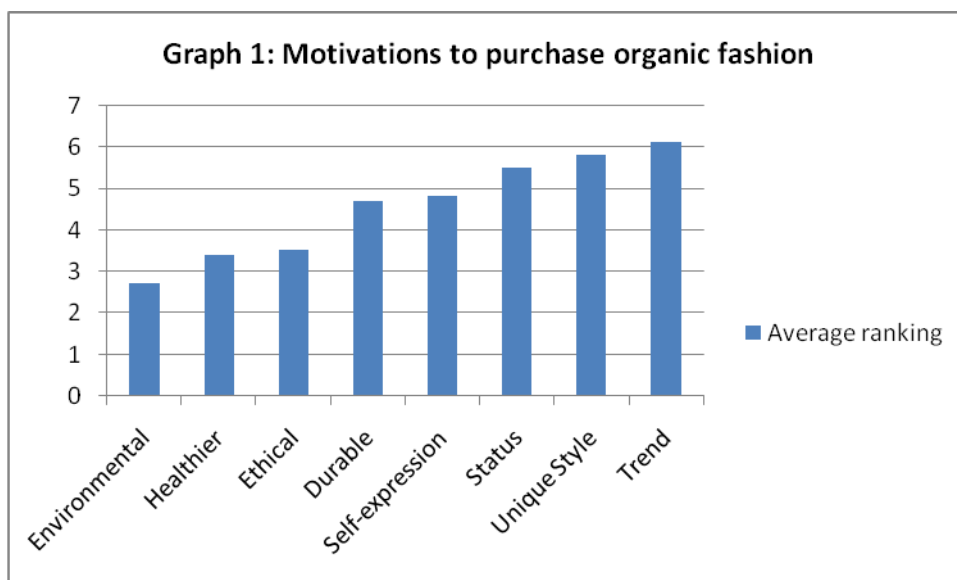
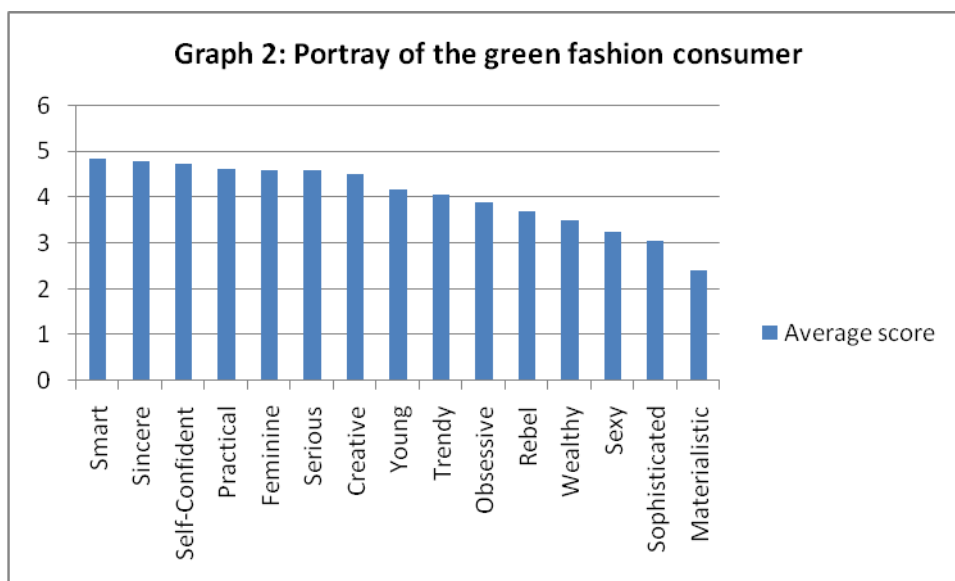


Image of the green fashion consumer. Respondents perceive the green fashion consumer as smart, sincere and self-confident. The three adjectives least describing the green fashion consumer in the mind of respondents are materialistic, sophisticated and sexy. A MANOVA was conducted with gender and origin as fixed factors. There is a main effect of gender on the variable obsessive ($F(1,116)= 13.58, p=.00$). Men tend to find green fashion consumers more obsessive than women (mean = 4.54 SD 1.71 vs. mean = 3.4 SD 1.76). There is a main effect of origin on five variables: sexy ($F(1,116) = 41.17, p=.00$), self-confident ($F(1,116)= 5.89, p=.017$), trendy ($F(1,116)= 7.69, p=.006$), rebel ($F(1,116)= 3.76, p=.05$) and wealthy ($F(1,116)= 10.39, p=.002$). Respondents in the Canadian sample tend to find the green fashion consumer more sexy (4.08 SD 0.18 vs. 2.38 SD 1.8), more self-confident (5.11 SD 0.22 vs. 4.35 SD 0.22) and more trendy (4.45 SD 0.21 vs. 3.58 SD 0.22) than respondents in the French sample. Respondents in the French sample tend to find the green fashion consumer more rebellious (4.11 SD 0.27 vs. 3.36 SD 0.27) and wealthier (4.09 SD 0.24 vs. 2.98 SD 0.24) than Canadian respondents.



CONCLUSION

Our results corroborate studies on green and ethical consumption on a number of issues. There seems to be neutral or indifferent attitudes toward green fashion, in line with studies conducted in the past (Butler and Francis, 1997). The intentions to purchase green fashion products are moderate, although higher in our Canadian sample, and do not differ between genders. Our qualitative results shade light on possible explanations for this relative lack of concern. Consumers seem lost in the exact meaning of green fashion and lack information on norms and processes. Often, they are unaware of the existence of green fashion alternatives to traditional adult fashion (Hopkins, 2009). Also, the issue of trust arises and a label certifying the organic origin is clearly called for (D'Souza et al. 2006). Further study should examine to what extent consumers would be willing to pay the extra price involved in having a third party label certifying this true organic origin.

Environment protection, health impact and ethical concerns are the best ranked motivations to engage in a green fashion purchase. Yet, cross-cultural differences appear clearly in the appeal of organic fashion. Both in our qualitative and quantitative results, we found that green fashion is much more appealing to North American, probably due to the impact of trendy clothing brands claiming their social responsibility concern such as American Apparel or Edun launched by Bono and his wife. North American participants and respondents in our studies have a positive image of the green fashion consumer who is portrayed as much younger, trendy, sexy, self-confident and with a unique style compared to the green consumer portrayed by the European participants. For the latter, the green consumer is perceived as wealthier and more rebellious: an activist with strong convictions who is prepared to pay for the extra price to support her/his ethical concerns. The status dimension is also more present in the results based on European samples. The trend for understatement in clothes (no logos) and stealth wealth seems to have a special resonance in

favor of the consumption of green products in general, and green fashion in particular.

Overall, we can conclude that there is a need to create awareness and inform better the consumers on the nature of organic fashion. In addition, especially in Continental European countries, green fashion has to be “glamorized” and become more appealing to the young generation which the early adopting group of most trends in the fashion industry.

Main limitations of this research lie in the convenience samples used for both qualitative and quantitative studies. Generalization of results is also limited by the homogeneity in education level and age of our samples. Our conclusions are based on samples drawn from a highly educated and rather young population. In the past, results were consistent in showing that highly educated consumers are more concerned with ethical and green issues (Finisterra do paco et al., 2009; Mintel, 2009). Also, younger consumers might be more interested both in fashion and in brands endorsing social responsibility credentials (LaFerla, 2007). Consequently, we assume that green fashion interest and perceptions would be even more negative working with samples of a lower educational level and / or older than ours.

Researches in green fashion consumer behavior are in their infancy. Yet, with the development of green fashion offerings and the growing interest of major brands for this trend, studies are called for in a variety of area, from demographics encompassing gender, to inter-cultural including emergent countries, to attitudinal and behavioral. We hope this exploratory paper will open fruitful avenues for researchers on ethical fashion issues.

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