

# AWARENESS OF FASHION ETHICS AMONG INDIAN FASHION DESIGN STUDENTS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** There is increased public awareness about the ethical issues in the recent past. More and more consumers are demanding products and services which are ethically produced. Therefore, the area of ethics has received increased attention from the businesses world over in the past decade. Academic institutes need to prepare students to tackle the challenges of real-world problems faced by businesses. Understanding the importance for ethics in businesses, universities world over has added ethics in their curriculum.

The question which guided this research: How much awareness do fashion design students have about ethical issues related to fashion industry? Thus, the current study is carried out to develop a reliable scale to measure awareness about fashion ethics among fashion design students. Also to know the areas of ethics where design students lack understanding.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A self-developed questionnaire is used to measure the construct of fashion ethics and its dimensions- social ethics, sustainability ethics, environmental ethics and creative ethics. These dimensions of fashion ethics are measured using multiple items and these items were modified and/or developed from the review of literature.

**Originality/value:** The research will have value for the fashion institutes seeking to measure the awareness of fashion ethics among its students. The scale of measurement of ethics developed in this study can be used to measure students' awareness about fashion ethics. Based on the information about the areas of fashion ethics in which students are lacking the knowledge, institutions can modify their curriculum and pedagogy to inculcate those values.

*Keywords: Design ethics, fashion education, exploratory study*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the last two decades ethics and sustainability are the buzz words in the business world. Both have become part of growing design philosophy that emphasis environmentally friendliness along with social responsiveness. When a product is designed and produced according to sustainable design philosophy, a lot of consideration is given on environment, social and moral impact of the product all through its life time. Fashion industry is also catching up this trend of incorporating ethics and sustainability in all activities. Fashion industry has realised that affordable and trend-sensitive fast fashion is highly profitable, but it has ethical issues associated with it (Aspers and Skov, 2006).

There is increased public awareness about the ethical issues in the recent past. More and more consumers are demanding products and services which are ethically produced. Therefore, the area of ethics has received increased attention from the businesses world over in the past decade. As stated by Mei-Ling Lu (2014) that luxury fashion consumers have no more demands for just finest material but look for ethical and sustainable practices these products have been made with. Therefore, fashion brands these days are communicating their social concern for the planet to sink in with the customer's demand. On the one hand fashion brands are adopting the policy of "energy efficient processing, less water and land, less emission of toxic materials to the environment, minimum use of gases that produce greenhouse gases, recycle of fashion items" to show their commitment to sustainability. And on the other hand, fashion brands conscious about "the compliance issues of the labour law, against child labour and for the congenial environment of work for the workers" to take care of ethical aspects

(Kaikobad *et al.*, 2015). Concepts of ethical fashion are being adopted by the fashion industry across the world. The only difference is that in some countries like UK and Europe it is widely accepted, while it is in an emerging stage in many other countries (B1). Much has been done by fashion industry in terms of sustainability but a lot is yet to be done in the areas of fair and ethical production practices. While customers demanding ethical products are increasing in number, the proportion is still minuscule Niinimäki (2010). It's critical to see whether the ethically conscious consumer gets enough of fashion elements in their products, only then can an overall demand of holistically ethical design market can be advocated. Fashion brands still do not create enough ethical product range for all the consumers, it's still difficult to source recycle product with fair trade. Joergens (2006) states that many respondents in one study claimed that besides wanting to have ethically sourced clothing they want it to be 'fashionable' enough. Therefore, future fashion design practice incorporating ethics is important. One way to influence future practice is to inform future practitioners about ethics when they are part of higher education system. Therefore, the curriculum taught in fashion design schools needs to ensure that its students are aware about the concept of ethical fashion and will be able to use them when they join the industry.

The designers can use sustainable and holistic approach to fashion and make the difference. Therefore, the next generation of designers must learn to apply sustainability and ethics to the entire process from design to manufacturing to marketing. Thus, from the inception stage itself ethics in design needs to be imbibed. Academic institutes need to prepare students to tackle the challenges of real-world problems faced by businesses.

Designers need to be taught to make more ethical choices. According to Mei-Ling Lu (2014) design means to create value by right choices. The students with good knowledge of ethical issues associated with fashion industry when absorbed into the fashion system will be able to influence the industry. The students need to have enough awareness to say that's not ethical, to offer ethical choices and to influence others.

Therefore, current study is carried out to develop a scale which can be used to measure the awareness about fashion ethics among fashion designers.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Ethical Fashion

Ethical fashion refers to how human beings involved in making the clothes were treated. It includes everything from harmful effect of pesticides to the farmers working in the fields to how the workers involved in manufacturing the clothes were treated. Whether they were paid fair wages and whether safe working conditions were ensured for the workers. Therefore, no sweatshops, child labour, worker abuse, or slavery were involved in the clothes production. Sustainable fashion refers to no harm to the environment during the production of clothing. Sustainable practices includes no use of pesticides in growing cotton/other natural fabrics, use of natural dyes, water and waste treatment before discharge, use of energy efficient technology, use of recycled materials, reusable packaging etc. Some researchers use an all-encompassing definition of ethical fashion and include sustainable fashion and animal treatment under its umbrella (B2). This is a more complete definition of ethical fashion and thus this is the definition being used in the current research study.

Mei-Ling Lu (2014) ethical fashion emphasises a bond between people and environment, it super imposes the importance of design, sourcing and manufacturing to be such which maximise the welfare and benefit of people and minimise the impact on earth.

Allwood *et al.* (2006) in their research identified environmental impact, and the social concerns were the two significant problems the fashion industry is facing. The energy used during material and fibre production, and laundering clothes; toxic chemicals, discharge of chemicals in water systems; textile waste during manufacturing processes and disposal of garments are the major environmental impacts associated with the fashion industry. Child labour; workforce abuse; sexual harassment, low pay and poor working conditions for employees are the social issues associated with fashion industry. Hazardous chemicals used in manufacturing are not only harmful to the environment but to the human health too.

The awareness and concern for ethical and sustainable issues gradually increasing in the society over the past 20 years. This growth in the awareness can be attributed to increased media interest, increased concern for social responsibility and support from the pressure group. It is important to make future

designers aware about ethical and sustainable impact of their work when they are still in education system. This will ensure consistent growth in concern for ethical and sustainable issues in fashion industry (B3).

## **2.2 Fashion Design Education**

A designer uses his competency to produce a product which fulfils requirements of an individual or a group. Design is an art that gives competency to club scientific knowledge and technological possibilities. Designers as creators can allow nature and commerce to co-exist when they are making products, industrial systems, and buildings. According to Fletcher and Grose (2012), a designer has the capability to influence the mainstream business model. With his knowledge a designer has potential to become an agent of change.

Therefore, it is important that students should be made aware about environment friendly materials and processes. They should be imparted knowledge about ethical manufacturing and consumer's relationships with products. It's important that designers be aware of the effects of their design. A designer with his design process has capability to impact an idea from its inception to the end product (Leerberg *et al.*, 2010). Academicians have the responsibility of contributing to the moral development of their students. It is strongly felt that students need to be imparted with a fully developed value system which emphasises public welfare.

While emphasising ethics among Indian fashion design students, it is important to understand that "India" is one of the important Asian countries which are a leading sourcing hub for manufacturing products for international market. A major segment of these students gets absorbed by different export houses which are working for various international brands across the globe. These students are among the core members working collectively on the fashion product and at the same time also witness the consequences of unethical production systems around them. Thus there is a support for the importance of the student's awareness towards ethical design by utilising various design tools.

## **2.3 Principles of Fashion Ethics**

A theoretical model given by Maarit Aakko and Ritva Koskennurmi-Sivonen (2013) integrates the elements of sustainability and fashion design. The model elaborates the principles and practices of sustainable fashion design. The model has "considered take and return" principle at its core and illustrates sustainable practices related to material sourcing, fabric treatment, production methods, saving resources, societal implications, information transparency, and attachment and appreciation.

The Fashion Design for Sustainability (FDS) model given by Gwilt (2012) has two main principles. One, the model encourages attaching the life cycle thinking to the design and production phases. Two, the model integrates sustainable strategies to the fashion design practice. Hennenger *et al* (2016) in their work emphasised on environmentally friendly raw materials, local sourcing and production, traceability of work processes and raw materials, and transparency across the supply chain. They also advocated social aspects like safe working conditions and fair wages for workers.

Thomas (2017) in her book proposed interventions for sustainability and ethics in the fashion design/production loop. Apart from the interventions which are social and environmental nature they also emphasised about intellectual copyright/property, cultural copyright/property during evolution of concept stage of design. Black (2008) in their research proposed few sustainable strategies specific to fashion design: Re-thinking design for the entire fashion life cycle, Reclaim and reuse waste materials, Recycle, Up cycle, Repair and Remodel, Recreate, Reduce, Use ecological, Use mono materials and harness new technology. Castro (2010) emphasised on three ethical principles "1. Fair trade or ethical trading, 2. Organic or sustainable material and 3. Up cycling or recycling (B4).

Taking clues from the above principles and practices of sustainability and ethics in fashion a framework for ethics in fashion has been developed. Most of the codes of ethical businesses practices include the dimensions of social ethics, sustainability ethics, and environmental ethics. To this fourth dimension of creative ethics was added to take care of ethics during concept stage of design as suggested by Thomas (2017). The proposed structure of ethics in fashion is elaborated through the dimensions of social ethics, sustainability ethics, environmental ethics and creative ethics.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The objectives and scope of the study are of such nature that a quantitative approach seems to be a sound and practical and thus, for the study, quantitative data analysis was used, with qualitative measures complementing the former. For the purpose of this study, a scale for awareness of fashion ethics was developed.

Having identified the various ingredients from the literature and having prepared a preliminary structure for fashion ethics, a research strategy was developed to identify statements that would capture the students' awareness about ethical issues in fashion design. Firstly a list of items was generated for each of the dimension of fashion ethics. Multiple measures were developed for each of the dimensions of fashion ethics in from the literature review. The researcher benefited from the existing literature related to principles of fashion design. But studies related to measurement of awareness about fashion ethics among students of a fashion institute are rare and have not been identified. Relevant literature of fashion ethics was reviewed and synthesised to come up with 25 items explaining the four dimensions of fashion ethics. All the items were measured on Likert scale of 1 to 5. Students were asked to rate the seriousness of each ethical issue while designing a new product, from 1 being not serious at all to 5 being extremely serious.

For the purification of the scale, content and face validity was assessed through two experts. Twenty five items under four dimensions of fashion ethics were reviewed by two academicians from the field of fashion design and technology. The experts suggested the rewording of an item.

The questionnaire was administered to 136 Textile Design/Fashion Design/Accessory Design students of a design institute. 8 questionnaires were incomplete and thus were not used for analysis. Before pooling the data from the 3 different streams of courses, the data were analysed for equality of variance of the student population of the three categories of courses using the F-Test.

### 4 RESULTS

The reliability of an instrument can be statistically validated through the Item-to- Total correlation and Cronbach's alpha Coefficient. So, the Item- to-Total Correlation and Cronbach's alpha Coefficient were calculated for the each of the dimensions of fashion ethics; these are illustrated in Table 1.

*Table 1. Scale Items, Corrected Item-to-Total Correlations and Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>Corrected Item to-Total Correlation</b>	<b>Alpha if item deleted</b>	<b>Coefficient alpha</b>
Sustainability Ethics	Make wise use of natural resources	.367	.605	.648
	Maximise Product Life	.376	.601	
	Minimise impact during use	.416	.589	
	Make wise use of locally available resources	.326	.623	
	Minimise load on land fills	.420	.584	
	Research low impact materials (B5)	.354	.609	
Environmental Ethics	Eliminate harmful processes on fabric & hard ware	.429	.637	.685
	Identify Manufacturing Waste	.445	.632	
	Minimise waste	.388	.651	
	Reduce packaging	.347	.665	
	Use efficient transportation	.480	.621	
	Support sustainable agriculture	.393	.650	
Social Ethics	Support endangered areas and cultures and promote local economies	.493	.721	.753
	Work with businesses that provide good working conditions for employees.	.561	.702	
		.632	.680	

	Work with businesses that provide documentation for all claims	.341	.758	
	Work with businesses that go beyond legislative requirements	.416	.741	
	Educate the Consumer	.532	.710	
	Influence the Industry to make ethical choices			
Creative Ethics	exhibit ethical conduct related to interacting with others such as client confidentiality	.469	.696	.733
	privacy of sensitive content	.531	.681	
	providing proper credit for ideas	.562	.674	
	apply copyright laws in relation to fair use and duplication of materials (B6 and B7)	.414	.709	
	emotionally durable design	.346	.724	
	design for up-cycling	.396	.713	
	design for Reuse and Recycling	.404	.712	

For all the items, Item-to- Total Correlation was more than 0.3. The value of the Coefficient alpha ranged from 0.648 to 0.754 for the four dimensions of ethics in fashion design. None of the items from the scale needs to be removed as removal of none is going to improve the value of the Coefficient alpha. It is also noteworthy that the Co-efficient alpha for one of the dimensions, viz., ‘Sustainability Ethics’ was 0.648 which is little less than 0.65, the minimum required for the reliability of a dimension. Mean value of awareness about four dimensions of ethics among design students were, social ethics 3.665, sustainability ethics 3.111, environmental ethics 3.460 and creative ethics 3.772.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In today’s competitive world sustainability and ethics are identified as important strategies to succeed in fashion industry. Still the gap was identified in conceptualisation of ethics in fashion. Thus, this study was carried out to better understand the dimensions that determine fashion ethics. The four dimensions of fashion ethics i.e. social ethics, sustainability ethics, environmental ethics and creative ethics were identified in the study.

Mean value of awareness among design students was highest for creative ethics dimension. This suggests that students are very well aware about creative ethics which need to be followed by fashion designers. Dimension of social responsibility ranked second in terms of awareness among design students. Reasons for these two dimensions ranking higher in awareness than other two dimensions might be that courses on intellectual property rights and corporate social responsibility are part of curriculum for the long time. While ethics and sustainability have been recently added in the curriculum.

In the institute where study is carried out, sustainable and ethical fashion is offered as a specialisation. Currently these two philosophies are not embedded as core elements in the fashion design programmes. The institute is undergoing major curriculum restructuring and proposing that the entire fashion programme from next academic year will have a compulsory course in sustainable and ethical fashion design. It is also proposed that once the knowledge about sustainable and ethical practices in design is given to students, they are required to use these practices in their every project and assignment.

Key managerial implication of this study is a data-driven framework for the institutes to identify the current level of awareness about fashion ethics issues among design students. Reliability and validity of the scale of fashion ethics developed in this study is verified therefore it can be used for the measurement of students' awareness of fashion ethics. This will allow various institutes to identify the areas of ethics in fashion where their students lack awareness. Based upon this feedback, institutes can re-frame and redesign their curriculum structure and delivery system.

The limitations of the study also needed to be seen while considering the contributions of the study. The study used judgmental sampling technique, which is a limitation as generalisation of the results is

better when probabilistic sampling techniques are used. Another limitation of the study is small sample size. If the study could have been conducted using larger sample size, generalisations would have been better validated. The scope of this study was limited to design students from an Indian fashion design institute. Similar study can be replicated in design institutes across the world and different cultures so as to understand the differences in awareness about fashion ethics among students from different parts of the world and different cultures.

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