

Research Summary

A qualitative project investigating public understanding of sustainable clothing. This research sets out people's current understanding of sustainable clothing and explores their response to behaviours that may mitigate impacts of their clothes buying, maintenance and disposal.

Using focus group methods with a deliberative follow up element the research explored: People's aspirations in relation to clothing – what would they like to buy and wear, and what might nudge their aspirations towards a more sustainable picture; People's assumptions of 'good clothing'; People's understanding of sustainable clothing; and People's expectations of government and industry.

Key findings

- Levels of awareness and understanding of the sustainability impacts of clothing are low
- Clothing choices mostly derive from considerations of identity and economy rather than wider impacts: Determinants of 'good' clothes include fashion, price, quality and longevity
- Fashion and cheap clothing influence clothing choices, but have different impacts on consumers depending on their life stage: Many people, particularly in younger age groups, purchase cheap, fashionable clothing, though they are aware that it will not last
- People acquire the information that influences their clothing choices during the activity of shopping itself, as well as from conventional media
- People may behave in a pro-environmental manner, such as line drying and using charity shops, but this may simply be an advantageous side-effect of their 'normal' routines
- People are aware of the environmental benefits of washing at reduced temperatures and line drying clothes but are constrained by their washing machine programme options, physical space and the weather
- There is a reluctance to reduce the frequency with which clothes are washed because of the attraction of 'fresh' clothes and a fear of odour
- Clothes are routinely disposed of to charities, but there is ignorance about what then happens to them –distinctions between textile recycling and clothing reuse are not clear
- Cheap clothes are more likely to be discarded to landfill than given to charity, but expensive 'branded' products are considered durable and therefore suitable for charity
- Participants expressed a degree of distrust of the motives of companies offering sustainable clothing but may respond positively to clear and consistent labelling and certification schemes across the European Union

Researchers' Recommendations

Findings are relevant to Defra's Sustainable Clothing Roadmap

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/consumerprod/products/clothing.htm> plus other consumer-facing policies. Researchers' recommendations based on key findings include:

- Create opportunities for stakeholders to work together to build people's trust, especially in government, industry and NGOs, to develop agreed standards, labelling and potentially remove clothing with the most significant impacts from the market.
- Build on the 'Wash at 30°C' campaign and consumers' desire for to save money to promote good habits in tumble-dryer use.
- Integrate information on the sustainability implications of clothing acquisition, use and disposal into the retail environment.

Methodology

The research followed a qualitative approach using 9 focus groups of two hours in duration across 3 locations in England: in total 99 people participated. Groups were recruited to the Defra segmentation model and without explicit knowledge of the focus on sustainability. Discussions in the group started with spontaneous reactions to clothing and led into discussions about clothes and sustainability. A sub-sample (n=29) of people were recruited to carry out a clothing maintenance diary and wardrobe audit. After two weeks these people were reconvened to one of three discussion groups to assess what information people had retained and highlight any changes in attitudes or behaviours.

Robustness

The main qualitative research element provides good reliability given the large sample for qualitative research (99 people). The follow up work further developed the insights from the first wave of research and started to explore whether changes occurred, with some quantified indication of responses although data can only be classified as exploratory due to small sample sizes. A methodological strength comes from the research approach as the 'sustainability' angle of the discussion was shielded from participants until they had put forward their aspirations and their reasons for their clothing choices, thereby minimising response bias.

Limitations

It is important to note that qualitative results report majority opinions and are *not generalisable* to the full population. This research was designed to set out a clear picture of 'where people are at now' rather than a detailed analysis of all their motivations for actions: further research is recommended to provide a fuller understanding of underlying concepts.

Identified Research Gaps

- Develop understanding of the motivations characteristic of each environmental behaviour both by goal and by segment.
- Test a range of communications messages or interventions including both the message itself and the message source (e.g. directly from government or via intermediaries or retailers).

Further information:

Summary Author and further contact:

Rachel Muckle, Social Science Research Manager, Environmental Behaviours Unit
Rachel.muckle@defra.gsi.gov.uk 020 7238 4615

Research Commissioned by:

Defra Environmental Behaviours Unit, 2007/08 – Ref number EV0405

Full reference:

Fisher, T, Cooper, T, Woodward, S, Hiller A and Goworek H, (2008) *Public Understanding of Sustainable Clothing: Report to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*. Defra, London.

Full report available at:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/scp/research/themes/theme3/sustain-consump0708.htm>

Framework Report fully describing the Defra segmentation model is available at:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/evidence/social/behaviour/index.htm>

Summary prepared: Monday 10th November 2008