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Americans Less Concerned About Impacts of Clothing, Want More Transparency

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Americans are divided on a lot of things—their opinions about clothing are no different. While a poll released Thursday found that American consumers are less concerned about the ecological impacts of what they wear than their overseas counterparts, most would also prefer to see large fashion brands open up about their social and environmental practices.

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Four in five of the 1,000 Americans surveyed by Ipsos MORI, in fact, want clothing brands to provide more information about their environmental commitments and the measures they are taking to curtail pollution in their supply chains. Around three quarters (73 percent) of respondents believe that clothing brands should be responsible for what happens in the manufacturing process, and that they need to take appropriate action to ensure clothes are produced in an environmentally friendly way.

This desire for transparency extends to the lives of factory workers, too. The majority of the American public (81 percent) say that clothing brands should be more forthcoming about the working conditions of employees in their supply chains, with a further 63 percent agreeing that the fashion industry generally pays low wages to the factory workers who make their garments.

Putting their money where their mouths are, roughly half, or 51 percent of respondents, expressed reluctance about buying from a brand that does not pay its workers a fair living wage, and 57 percent said they would be willing to pay 2 percent to 5 percent more for their garments if it allowed factory workers to earn a fair living wage.

“These findings show that American consumers want more information on working conditions in fashion supply chains and would be put off buying from brands that are not paying a fair living wage,” said Paul Roeland of the Clean Clothes Campaign, a global consortium of labor-rights groups that commissioned the poll with the Changing Markets Foundation, social and environmental advocacy group. “It’s time for the governments to act if the industry is not going to.”

But trust in brands isn't blind. A majority of Americans are cautious about being sold a bill of goods, with just a quarter (25 percent) admitting to trusting the sustainability information provided by the brands themselves. Further, less than a third (30 percent) think industry self-regulation is the most effective way to minimize the impacts of the fashion industry on the environment.

And it looks like brand communication could use some spiffing up as well. When questioned about specific brands like Gap, H&M and Nike, nearly half (49 percent) of Americans pleaded their ignorance about the sustainability of those supply chains, and 61 percent said they struggled to know which brands meet higher ethical standards.

Regarding the impacts of viscose production, an issue that has gained traction in industry circles of late, 66 percent of the American public agree that clothing brands should provide information about their viscose or rayon manufacturers and how their production affects the environment. Less than a quarter (22 percent) of respondents said they would believe a brand if it said it was difficult to find out information about who its viscose suppliers are. (There's that Yankee dubiety again.)

"This survey shows strong public support for action by the fashion industry to ensure brands manufacture clothes in an environmentally friendly way," said Ursa Trunk, a campaign advisor for the Changing Markets Foundation, which drafted a roadmap in 2017 for a cleaner viscose supply chain that counts among its supporters Asos, C&A, H&M, Inditex and Marks & Spencer. "Companies are going to need to make the switch to cleaner methods to meet these expectations."

On average, Americans lag behind other nationalities in terms of environmental awareness, Ipsos MORI said.

Though the United States make up the largest retail market in the world, it ranks bottommost of the countries polled when it comes to concern about the environmental impacts of clothing. Thirty-four percent of respondents, for instance, said they were troubled by the environmental impacts of their apparel purchases, compared with 42 percent of Britons, 47 percent of Italians and 63 percent of Spaniards.

Similarly, American consumers rank among the lowest when it comes to prioritizing ethical production over factors such as design and fit, quality and cost, all of which they regard as superior considerations for triggering a purchase.

Americans are also less likely than their European cousins to undertake sustainable actions. One in five (20 percent) respondents said they had bought clothes made from sustainable materials over the past year, while just 16 percent indicated they made environmentally friendly decisions when purchasing clothes.

All is not lost, however. Forty percent of respondents expressed at least a willingness to buy clothing made with sustainable materials in the next six months, Ipsos MORI said.

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