

87 The Bag Charge: good for the global environment, detrimental to the fashion retail environment?

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Abstract

The use of plastic is growing in importance for societal, sustainable and environmental debate. Since the 5p plastic bag charge was introduced in England on 5th October 2015 single use plastic bags sales have fallen by 86 per cent. This has had an impact on the high street as consumers choose to use 'bags for life' rather than the branded carrier bag. Classed as secondary packaging, these bags have historically provided prime advertising space for fashion retailers and brands, serving to not only carry product, but also the retailer or brand message. With a high street that is in a state of flux and decline at numerous levels across the industry, this paper seeks to identify the possible impact on both retail practice and consumer behaviour.

In light of the challenging issues currently facing the fashion industry, the physical shopping experience has been gaining momentum in importance. In order to entice the online shopper back into store, retail theatre and service are key strategies to achieve this. The experience of observing the purchase being wrapped in branded paraphernalia, to then enjoy the unwrapping of the goods once home, has become an integral part of the consumer post-purchase evaluation.

The academic literature surrounding the impact of the loss of this 'free advertisement' opportunity is severely lacking. However, there is growing interest in the phenomena referred to as 'unboxing,' increasingly present on social media platforms. It is argued that such activities have seen secondary packaging, such as branded carrier bags become integral to status and peer influencing.

This exploratory study adopts a qualitative research approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with key retailers and consumer focus groups. The chosen methodological approach will provide great insight into this under investigated phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

The carrier bag has sparked much discussion since the announcement that high street stores in England with over 250 employees nationwide, would charge 5p per bag from October 2015 (Sutherland, 2018). Implemented by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, most discussion centred on the new ruling about supermarkets, where the majority of bags are used by consumers.

Like the smoking ban that was enforced in the UK in July 2007, society is having to adjust, apparently willingly, and going to the supermarket prepared with a variety of canvas bags or 'bags for life' is following the same pattern. This is highlighted by the fact that single use plastic bag sales have fallen by 86% (The Independent, 2018), therefore consumers are being conditioned to ensure they have reusable bags with them. Edwards and Meyhoff (2011) state that the key to reducing the environmental impact of whatever type of bag is used is to reuse it as many times as possible, and to find a beneficial use for the bag when no longer useable for shopping.

Whilst consumers were becoming conditioned to the fact that supermarkets charge for carrier bags, many did not realise that the implanted changes also included retail stores. As Boyce (2015) states, if a consumer enters a store without a carrier bag, a £29.99 item of clothing will now cost a less familiar £30.04 if they chose to have their item bagged. Research conducted in 2015 by information site money.co.uk, found that 36% of people said that they never took carrier bags with them when clothes shopping. Therefore, an encouraging 64% of shoppers use reusable bags for their fashion purchases. However, from initial findings, some respondents felt that the carrier bag is part of the purchase and a factor within the whole experience, especially at the higher end of the market.

The work of Prendergast et al., (2001) into consumer perception of shopping bags, was an exploratory study at the time due to there being no published studies regarding shopping bags. Nearly two decades later, research into shopping bags has been in relation to the issue of sustainability and the environmental impact, with research focussing on what fashion retailers are doing to cut down on packaging waste and pollution (Sutherland, 2018).

Plastic bags have become a prominent symbol of environmental degradation (Thean, 2018) and a reduction in the use of plastic carrier bags is arguably a strategic move environmentally. However, this exploratory research aims to explore the impact on retail practice and consumer behaviour, specifically the overall shopping experience, which is yet to be considered within the research community.

RETAIL PRACTICE

By the very nature of the fashion market, it is subject to change. The highly competitive, volatile market place that is the UK fashion industry has undergone transformation in recent years, which has been the catalyst for new dynamic business practices; revised promotional tools; a consumer who is more

knowledgeable than ever, with the underlying factor of the digital and technological revolution. Mintel (2018) states that the UK clothing market is going through a dramatic period of change and adopting sustainable retail practice is one of the main drivers of this change.

Prior to the 5p single carrier bag charge being enforced in 2015, arguably one of the more consumer-facing sustainable practices that some retailers had been adopting was promoting the use of 'bags for life.' The consistent message of 'saving the environment' has been the underlying proposition for this. However, as Yeow et al. (2013) observed, the uptake of bags for life still remained at low levels, with Hoskins (2008) reporting that every plastic carrier bag that has ever been produced is still on the planet, in landfill, hedgerows or floating in the sea. However, this was five years ago and the implementation of the charge, and the threat to wildlife that is now widely publicised, has encouraged a transition to not only new shopping habits, but also an increasingly deeper commitment to environmental and social concerns (Richards and Zen, 2016).

Sutherland (2018) observes that the ethical and sustainable practice surrounding packaging all started with plastic bags, but 'fashion retailers have a part to play in this battle against plastic, particularly as the explosion in online orders means an increasing number of products are sent to customers wrapped in layers of plastic and paper.' Mintel (2018) identifies that fashion consumers are shopping less frequently, and whilst at present the reasons why people have changed their habits are not known, online shopping data suggests that people are purchasing more frequently online than those that shop instore, thus reinforcing Sutherland's observation.

Shopping bags as packaging

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2017), the term 'shopping bag' can be used interchangeably with the terms 'packaging' and 'package,' as the primary function of packaging is to contain and transport the product. Varley (2006) expands on this and alludes to the variety of functions that packaging performs, including protection of the product, aesthetic appeal to customers, a contributor to brand identity and a vehicle for promotional messages. All of which a shopping bag does.

Raheem et al., (2014) concur with Varley (2006), that packaging has become a sales promotional tool for organisations, and go on to further state that consumer buying behaviour can be stimulated by the packaging quality and becomes an ultimate selling proposition. For consumers immersing themselves into the physical shopping experience, watching the purchase being wrapped in branded packaging, including a carrier bag, is undeniably part of the opportunity to enrich and extend the experience. Arguably, this once seamless process is now interrupted by being asked if one would like to purchase a bag.

Branding

In an over saturated, homogenous market like the fashion industry, it is a key strategy for retailers to build a strong brand that resonates with consumers. The Business of Fashion (2017) acknowledges the need to build a brand that stands apart in a constantly changing landscape. According to de Chernatony et al. (2011), a brand is a cluster of functional and emotional values that enables organisations to make a promise about a unique and welcomed experience. Percy (2018) expands on this further and highlights that brands have specific meanings to consumers and these meanings derive, in part from experience.

Consumers want and expect a positive experience from the brands they chose to engage with and retail theatre has never been as important, in order to entice shoppers back into physical stores. It is noted that retail is not just about product anymore and a presence is needed; a sense of theatre (Drapers, 2011). Gill (2015) agrees that brand success can develop by exploring the possibility of creating immersive experiences, which more deeply and meaningfully connect with the consumer. Enhanced shopping experiences are therefore being embraced by retailers, to lure customers back into their stores, and as noted by Fashion United (2017), whether it is called social shopping, shopper entertainment or retail theatre, retailers are looking for more innovative ways to create an exciting instore experience.

Marketing communications

According to Keller (2010), marketing communications are the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade, incite, and remind consumers about the brands they sell. With consumers purchasing less frequently (Intel, 2018), it has never been as paramount that a fully integrated marketing campaign and strategy is devised by retailers to encourage consumers to spend with them. Percy (2018) suggests that packaging is a critical element in such strategies and campaigns, due to the powerful role packaging can play in building and reinforcing positive brand attitude and equity.

The branded carrier bag is one of the most cost effective advertising vehicles and is one of the only marketing elements that leaves the store. This prime example of outdoor advertising serves the function of a walking billboard and can be effective in reminding consumers of the brand, which is highlighted by Keller (2010) and Percy (2018). Silavoi and Speece (2007) consider this with regards to brand reflection and identify that the carrier bag serves the role of acting as a communication statement of where the consumer has chosen to shop from.

Consumers curate how they are perceived on a daily basis, and the branded carrier bag publically states the choice of branded purchase and directly communicates part of the consumer's personality. Malik et al., (2013) acknowledge that people are so conscious about their position in society and they prefer to use branded products to show off their status symbol. The subliminal message of a carrier bag provides

information of where peers are choosing to shop and can therefore be an influence on the decision to visit the store. 'Herd mentality' could be used to describe this effect, as human beings are instinctively influenced by their peers and often want to emulate their purchase decisions.

Differentiation in the fashion industry is key, so in a world where consumers are choosing to not purchase a branded carrier bag for either the cost or environmental reasons, it can be suggested that brand identity and visualisation is lost on the consumer leaving the shop. An array of canvas bags, bags for life and branded bags, where the branded contents do not necessarily match are frequently becoming the norm. In an already extremely volatile and competitive marketplace, the 'free advertising' provided by the carrier bag is something which can no longer be taken for granted by retailers, therefore other areas of the marketing communications mix need to recoup this potential deficient in influencing consumer behaviour on the high street.

CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

Consumer behavior is the study of the process involved when individuals or groups select, purchase, use or dispose of products, services, ideas or experiences to satisfy needs and desires (Solomon et al., 2016). In line with this, the driving force behind the decisions made by consumers is increasingly being influenced by their emotions rather than more practical reasons (Clarke et al., 2012).

Bray et al. (2011) states, with the ever-increasing pressure for the high street and consumers alike to take an ethical stance, this has ultimately become another consideration that is now influencing consumer conduct. Van der Wer et al., (2013) explore the concept of 'environmental self-identity,' defining it as the way you rate your behaviour from an environmental stance. Consumers whose actions are determined by this tend to purchase in a pro-environmental manner (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010).

Consumers are influenced by their peers, and may purchase with the intention to 'impress.' This is a relevant strategy capitalised upon by brands (O'Cass and Frost, 2002). Furthermore, Swaim et al., (2014) explain that peer influence is also very important when emulating environmentally considerate behavior.

Consumer experience

Brakus et al. (2009) defines the individual encounter a consumer has with a brand as one driven by the sensation and feelings that are evoked by the interaction. For many, shopping is recreational, often referred to as 'retail therapy', a term loosely used by Kang and Johnson (2012) to define the activity of shopping with the aim to make a person feel better. This planned activity coincides with purchase intent, which consists of planned timing and circumstances by the consumer (Lu et al., 2014).

At many market levels, the activity of shopping can be perceived as a luxury, indulgent and an opportunity to spend hard earned money. The introduction of charging for carrier bags could be perceived as directly contradictory to such a positive past time, removing a previous included element of the experience. Hultén (2011) acknowledges that an element of brand experience is dependent on connection to one of the consumers five senses, including the appearance of the logo previously an integral part of the supplied carrier bag.

Consumer post purchase

Norman (2009) observes the point of unpacking and the 'first impression' as integral to the evaluation of the overall purchase, as consumers are prone to forgetting the events prior to that point. In support of this, Dazalola (2012) describes packaging as a crucial part of the 'post purchase' event, suggesting this is an emotionally critical point, prior to using the purchase for the first time.

The manner in which a store wraps a purchase also influences the consumer's intention to revisit and make further purchases. A recent study conducted by Dotcom Distribution (2016), identified that 61% of the surveyed people shopping in the luxury goods market, state that a repeat purchase was more likely if a brand had provided 'gift-like' packaging as part of the purchase. This is due to the VIP sensation such additional attention to detail creates.

The increasing importance of packaging on the post purchase event can be observed through the growing trend of 'unboxing' videos that are becoming a popular on social media. According to Craig and Cunnigham (2017), this phenomenon first emerged in the early 2000s on websites such Unbox.it and unboxing.com. People are filmed unwrapping their purchase in a considered, careful manner, talking through details of how the purchase has been wrapped and the enjoyment gained from this activity demonstrating the importance of packaging in today's society.

METHODOLOGY

As previous research exploring the effect of the single use bag charge on retail practice and consumer behaviour does not exist, the research area aligns with an exploratory driven research focus. The purpose of which is to assess the phenomena in a new way, by discovering new insights and to pose questions (Robson and McCartan, 2015), in order to gain valuable insight into a topic of interest by asking open questions to gain a sense of what is happening. It is flexible and adaptable to change (Sanders et al., 2015), therefore making exploratory research ideal for an investigation into the retail and consumer impact of the single use carrier bag charge in the UK.

The research adopted a qualitative approach, as this type of research is undertaken when little or nothing is known about a phenomenon and when the researcher wants

to uncover more about it, which is common practice when investigating individuals' experiences and views.

Two industry interviews were conducted to facilitate an understanding of the perceived effect on retail that the bag charge is having and to get a sense of the potential loss of brand identity on the high street. The semi-structured interview approach was adopted, as it provided a suitable fit with the approach adopted for this research and purposive sampling was elected, as the researchers purposefully chose respondents who are relevant to the project (Sarantakos, 2012).

A focus group was conducted with eight female respondents aged 29-38, all with careers in creative or retail industries. All participants had studied to at least degree level, and had an interest in shopping as an activity. One quarter of the group considered themselves 'environmentally conscious', and whilst although the remainder of the group did not feel they fully embodied this title, all stated they used or had actively used bags for life/canvas bags when purchasing.

Before conducting the face-to-face interviews and the focus group, the interview questions had to be formulated. Themes were selected from the literature review process, but as mentioned previously, there are gaps in the literature which the primary data collection served to fill. As Gill et al., (2008) propose, due to the flexibility aspect, unexpected and new data can arise, which was the case within this research, with key probes and cues in particular serving as effective tools in achieving this outcome.

The three most common forms of qualitative analysis, as highlighted by Robson and McCartan (2016) are grounded theory, quasi-statistical and thematic analysis. The latter was selected as it challenges subjects through interpretations and provides greater understanding of issues (Marks and Yardley, 2004; Namey et al., 2008).

Thematic analysis was originally introduced in the 1970's (Merton, 1975) for identifying and evaluating emerging patterns in qualitative data. Flexibility is the cornerstone of this approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013) with Taylor and Ussher (2001) stating that thematic analysis can be used across a wide range of theoretical contexts. Utilising this method provided great insight and aided the formulation of the research findings.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The industry respondents began by discussing their thoughts on the current UK fashion market, which was split between successes and struggles. Overridingly, it was noted that the pure play retailers are riding the wave of online success, whilst commenting on the struggles witnessed by other players, especially in the mid-market and department store arena. Talk of decline was firmly rooted in the high

street with Respondent A commenting that, *'the overall store market is declining and we have seen that in the insight every year with the market data. Liquidations are announced frequently – it is really tough out there.'* This sentiment was echoed by Respondent B who remarked that, *'you can see with liquidations being announced, it's tough, definitely tough out there. The market has totally changed over the last decade and we are in a whole other world of pain right now.'*

Competition and the pace of change have been unprecedented, with a continued polarisation of the market. *'It's very competitive at the moment, with two polarising sides to it – the very value driven and the very quality driven and I don't see that they cross over'* (Respondent A). The current climate was described as favourable for the consumer, as retailers struggle to get their spend. Respondent B commented, *'from a marketing point of view, it is very challenging and I think we've gone through a revolution in terms of how we trade, as well as the digital/media revolution. As a customer, you've never actually had more choice as a customer. The UK is one of the best places to shop on the planet. We really have a decent high street, as well as access to the whole world.'*

Consumers shopping less frequently

It was a concern raised by many of the respondents that even if consumers are venturing into store, spending has decreased and they are not purchasing the same volumes as five years ago. *'We are seeing a drop in shoppers coming into store and those that do are spending less. People still haven't got the money to spend'* (Respondent B). Respondent A slightly contradicted this reflection, but posed the same concerns regarding purchasing levels – *'When you do go on the high street, there are still lots of people there, but it's whether they are actually purchasing which is the question.'* As previously mentioned, this observation has also been highlighted by Mintel (2018). Both respondents commented on the convenience and choice factor offered by online shopping that is drawing consumers away from the physical store.

It was reflected upon by both respondents that in light of current trading, bricks and mortar retailers are looking for ways to maintain and entice consumer interest, specifically away from pure play retailers. *'We have seen a lot of people who are having to heavily discount to try and get their customers away from online retailers'* (Respondent A). The conversation then moved onto the vast challenges for the high street in terms of encouraging consumers back into store and to provide retail theatre and services, other than just clothing. *'We are exploring ways to give consumers added value that they physically cannot get online to make them return to the high street'* (Respondent B).

The consumer was discussed regarding the array of information outputs in the market; and that the consumer of today is well educated on fashion due to the wealth of information available literally at their fingertips. *'Due to the range of inputs you can get online now and in print, they've got this vast knowledge of information, so*

we're trying to really think about what can we give that's any different, so she knows so much already. She knows more than she's ever known. Our customers are as educated as we are, essentially.'(Respondent, A).

The constant feed of information available to consumers is making them ethically aware about how their fashion choices and consumption could be contributing to a much wider issue. *'There is somewhat of a division in our consumer base – those whom choose to shop in a more ethical manner and take advantage of initiatives we have regarding a more sustainable way of shopping, and those who just want the latest trends for less and do not necessarily consider the environment in their purchases.'* (Respondent A).

The implications of the single use carrier bag charge

With the discussion moving onto the issue of sustainable shopping and environmental practices, the respondents reflected upon the carrier bag charge. As mentioned previously, the 5p bag charge was implemented for companies with more than 250 workers nationwide. However, as reported by the BBC (2018) the fee will be doubled to 10p and could come into effect in January 2020. Interestingly, many high street retailers are already charging consumers this amount for a carrier bag. The monetary amounts from this revenue generator remains rather ambiguous surrounding fashion retailers, as there is currently only published supermarket data. However, the retailer the respondents represent still charge the fee of 5p.

'Due to the split in our consumer base, we did have some reservations regarding how our consumers would react to the charge. Most have accepted it and buy a bag if they have forgotten theirs, but mostly, they have their own bags to use' (Respondent A). Respondent B agreed with this comment and said that since the charge coming in, most consumers use their own bags. When asked if they felt this was for cost or environmental reasons, the respondents agreed that it was possibly down to the cost and that their consumer base are used to using canvas bags to carry their shopping.

As branded shopping bags are a highly visible means of marketing on the high street (Moore, 2012), both respondents raised their concerns that as fewer consumers are purchasing branded bags, the visual representation of the brand is not exiting the store. *'The carrier bag used to be taken for granted by both consumers and retailers alike. It was the norm to automatically put the product into a bag without having to ask the customer if they wanted to buy a bag. It has taken some getting used to'* (Respondent B). Respondent A agreed and stated *'it is such a great loss of free advertising not having your carrier bag leave the store 100% of the time. I know myself from shopping that I do take note of what carrier bags fellow shoppers are holding. If I see many from one particular store, my interest peaks and make me wonder if there is a good sale going on or something'* (Respondent B). Both respondents concluded that the effect of more consumers using their own bags is

being monitored, as a greater reliance on other marketing channels will be required in order to retain a branded presence on the high street.

None of the respondents within the focus group objected to the introduction of the 5p charge for the bag and as will be discussed, half of the group supported the idea that the charge should be increased.

Introduction of the bag charge

Focus group respondents understood the reasons behind the introduction of the bag charge from an environmental point of view. They remarked that the decision not to purchase a bag and use canvas or 'bags for life' options came due to a variety of reasons, with sustainability often influencing their actions in a very minimal manner. This disparity between being conscious of environmental issues, but not prioritising it in ones' behaviour is known as 'the Green Gap' (Nielsen, 2011). Respondent G continued this topic of conversation by explaining, *'I know the charge is there to encourage people to be more sustainable, which is great, but plastic bags have always been unpractical in my opinion anyway. I much prefer paper or canvas bags.'* Respondent Z agreed, *'plastic bags are annoying once you get them home. At least you can put paper bags in the recycle bin. I don't understand why all shops don't use them.'*

This was an interesting point and the discussion of the difference between the quality of the brown paper bags used by the high street store Primark and those of brands such as Selfridges was highlighted. The group suggested this may be due to cost and market level and was a theme revisited later in the focus group. Respondent M added, *'the charge doesn't really bother me, but I don't know if it's effective as a deterrent.'* This raised the debate of whether the charge should actually be increased to encourage people to reuse bags more. Respondent G continued with, *'the charge doesn't bother me, I think if it was raised then that would encourage even more people to bring their own. If you have to buy a bag you definitely try and fit more in them to reduce the number of bags you have to buy.'*

She explained this comment had little to do with the cost, but with the recurring theme of disliking 'owning' too many plastic bags. This opinion was the consensus of the focus group; there were no negative feelings towards being charged, but with being left with plastic bags that had little purpose afterwards. It is interesting to note, that when the purpose of 'bags for life' and the concept of reusing them was highlighted, the group still viewed these negatively saying they were normally 'forgotten' or 'ugly' and much more suited for grocery shopping rather than clothes shopping. Canvas bags, it was unanimously agreed, are a greater welcomed option.

Branding

Brands create and communicate their vision with the consumer (Moore, 2012), through an integrated marketing communications strategy, which the branded carrier

bag is an integral part of. With this in mind, the respondents were asked to consider the impact of the disappearance of branded carrier bags from the high street.

'It has no impact on me what so ever, I'm never aware of them anyway. It's not the same as a branded piece of clothing is it?' Added respondent T. All the respondents concurred and respondent G continued: *'I don't think it's important, whether it's more practical is a bigger concern. The only time it matters is when I'm purchasing something from a 'posh' shop, something I've paid a lot for, then I want people to know where I've been shopping!'* Such observations support the notion highlighted by Jobber (2016) that brand reflection is key and is the notion of how the consumer perceives themselves as a result of purchasing from that particular brand.

Appropriateness

During the focus group, it became increasingly apparent that appropriateness of what type of bag should be used was very dependent on purpose of the shopping occurrence. It was agreed that grocery and clothes shopping are very different and therefore, the customer has different expectations of a shopping experience. *'I expect to take bags to the supermarket but it's not always appropriate when purchasing an item of clothing'* noted respondent T, a comment agreed with by the majority. Respondent Z added, *'I am not concerned with what I put my food shopping in as long as it holds it, I just don't want to come home with a load of plastic bags, so that's when I try to remember my bags for life or canvas ones etc.'*

Respondent G made a comment which resonated with the group, *'when buying clothes or shoes, it feels wrong putting them in a bag for life.'* The mundane activity of grocery shopping requires practicality from shopping bags, rather than acting as a statement of purchase which a branded carrier bag on the high street does.

Respondent N supported this with identifying the previously endured unpracticality of plastic carrier bags and the improved endurance canvas bags offer, *'I definitely prefer using my own bags to getting plastic supermarket bags etc. One for the plastic and plus, I hate having loads of horrible plastic bags everywhere. I've used canvas bags for supermarket shopping for ages, as split/heavy plastic bags on the bus/tube/ walking home is never nice.'*

Respondent M introduced another perspective on grocery carrier bags, highlighting the relevance on the brand of shop, *'I think it's a battle of the Jones' - in certain areas you see a lot of M&S, Booths, Waitrose bags. Bags for life can be a status item but as equally as can high end retail.'* This comment introduced the theme of market level and the use of branded bags. The respondents in the focus group felt this was a crucial differentiation that affected their opinion on the bag used, moving on from the need for practicality into status and the subliminal message a branded carrier bag projected.

Status

The focus group was encouraged to think why the difference in the expectation of shopping at different market levels existed, and through this, the importance of packaging and bags was investigated further. Respondent T reflected, *'for me if I was buying clothing, shoes or something as a one-off purchase I feel like the bag is part of the purchase - mainly, something higher end possibly.'*

When a purchase is considered as a luxury rather than a necessity, then the status of the bag apparently rises. A necessity would be a utilitarian procurement, designed to satisfy a need (Wiedmann et al., (2009); in the context of this debate, food to satisfy hunger etc. Luxury, in contrast, is defined by Berry (1994) as 'objects of desire that provide pleasure.' Respondent G added, *'if I have saved to buy a 'treat' particularly from a high end branded shop I expect the packaging, it's not just about people seeing what you have bought but more about the experience for yourself, it's indulgent and that's how the purchase and how it is wrapped should feel.'* Respondent N agreed, *'I love nice packaging and expect nice packaging in fancy shops, especially if I'm spending a bit of money on the item.'*

Such comments echo the importance of the correlation between purchase type, particularly market level and the expectation of how it will be packaged. The concept of branded packaging, including the bag being integral to the purchase came through as an increasingly strong theme. Respondent Z stated, *'purchasing from stores who package their items in branded boxes, tissue makes it all feel like part of the purchase.'* This was agreed by all respondents. Respondent M summarised, *'the notion of unwrapping an item you have bought whilst out shopping is part of the process; rather than your item just put the bag you've brought with you. So, for me it's definitely linked to the product being purchased.'*

From the focus group, it became very clear that sustainability was the least deciding factor behind choosing to use 'bags for life'. Although it was agreed that this was a welcome consideration on the high street, increased practicality and the aesthetics of options such as canvas bags played a much bigger part, as well as the dislike for having numerous carrier bags in the home. The willingness to use paper bags was clear, as these are already visible on the high street and often associated with high end purchasing.

The respondents made it very clear of the expectations they had regarding purchasing luxury, indulgent items and how they should be packaged. To coincide with the findings of Venter et al (2011), it was observed that branded bags and packaging become increasingly important in this scenario, as they are viewed as 'part of the purchase.' However, this is not a factor related to lower market purchases, where the branded message on the carrier bag is not of importance to the respondents.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, it has become increasingly apparent that existing research into this area is lacking, and the previous context has been focussed on the impact of branding and packaging regarding the purchasing of food produce. Although sustainability is becoming an increasing focus in the apparel retail environment, the implications of charging for a carrier bag have not all been successfully pre-empted.

Differentiation in the fashion industry is key, so in a world where consumers are choosing not to purchase a branded carrier bag for either cost or environmental reasons, it can be suggested that brand identity and visualisation is lost on the consumer leaving the shop. An array of canvas bags, bags for life and branded bags, where the branded contents do not necessarily match are frequently becoming the norm. In an already extremely volatile and competitive marketplace, the 'free advertising' provided by the carrier bag is something which can no longer be taken for granted by retailers, therefore other areas of the marketing communications mix need to recoup this potential deficient in influencing consumer behaviour on the high street.

Moving forward, research will be undertaken into why consumers see packaging as integral to purchase, and how high street stores will need to replicate the packing ritual experienced in luxury stores in order to maintain the interest of consumers in a physical store environment.

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