

Untrustworthy memories make it hard to shop ethically

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Imagine a shopper, Sarah, who is concerned about child labour and knows about groups like the [Fair Wear Foundation](#) that certify which brands sell ethically produced clothing. Hours after learning that [fashion giant H&M](#) reportedly sells clothing made by children in risky workplaces in Burma, she goes shopping. Completely forgetting about what she just heard, she buys an H&M dress.



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What happened? Sarah either forgot about that child labour allegation, or she mistakenly recalled that H&M was on Fair Wear's list of [ethical brands](#) – which it isn't. Either way, how could she make such an error?

We are interested in how actual purchasing can be different from consumers' own values. Our research shows that even though [most consumers](#) want to buy ethically sourced items, it's hard for them to heed these sentiments, especially when adhering to their sentiments requires remembering something.

Selective memories

It's not easy to shop ethically in the U.S. Nearly all the [clothing sold here is imported](#). Although not all imported clothing is made in exploitative workplaces, companies that demonstrably benefit from unfair and even [dangerous labor practices](#) abroad continue to flourish.

Prior [consumer psychology research](#) has shown that people dislike thinking about unethical issues associated with their purchases. When you buy a new sweater, you probably don't want to contemplate the harsh reality that it might have been made by exploited workers. And you may be tempted to come up with [rationalizations](#) to avoid thinking much about these issues.

In fact, consumers may do their best to [remain ignorant](#) about whether a product is ethical or not, simply to avoid the anguish they would experience if they were to find out.

Unethical amnesia

We wanted to learn what consumers would do if they had to face the truth.

Perhaps they might just forget that truth. After all, memory is not a particularly accurate [recording device](#). For example, recent psychological research suggests that people experience “[unethical amnesia](#)” – a tendency to forget when they have behaved unethically in the past.

So would shoppers also prefer to forget when a company exploits workers or engages in other unethical actions? We predicted that they would.

In a series of studies described in an article published in the [Journal of Consumer Research](#), we explored why consumers' memories might fail them when it comes to recalling whether products are ethical. It turns out that there is a predictable pattern for what consumers are likely to remember (or forget) about the ethicality of products.

In general, we found that consumers are worse at remembering bad ethical information about a product, such as that it was produced with child labour or in a polluting manner, than they are at remembering good ethical information – such as that it was made with good labour practices and without much pollution. Our findings should trouble the many companies now vying for the [ethical consumerism market](#) and the people who buy those products.

As John Oliver explains with humor, low prices are way better for consumers than for garment workers making trendy clothes.

Avoiding feeling torn

To test our hypothesis, we studied how well 236 undergraduates would remember manufacturing information about six wooden desks. We did not select any of the participants for these studies based on whether they did or did not see themselves as ethical consumers.

We told these students that half of the six brands of desks were made from wood sourced from endangered [rainforests](#) and that the rest came from wood sourced from sustainable [tree farms](#).

After they had several opportunities to study and memorize the descriptions, the participants completed unrelated tasks for approximately 20 minutes. Then we displayed only the desks' brand names and asked the students to recall their descriptions.

The participants were significantly less likely to correctly remember when a desk was made with rainforest wood compared to when it was made with sustainable wood. They either did not remember the wood source at all or wrongly recalled that the desk was made from sustainable wood.

Did that suggest shoppers just don't want to remember unpleasant information about brands?

To find out, we looked into how accurately the students would remember other attributes of the desks, such as their prices. We found that they didn't make the same kinds of errors.

People generally strive to [act morally](#), which in this case would mean remembering whether products are ethically sourced or not and then presumably acting accordingly. However, people also do not want to feel bad or guilty.

And no one enjoys [feeling torn](#). The easiest way for conscientious shoppers to avoid this inner conflict is to yield to their consumerist whims by forgetting details that might trigger ethical concerns.

The Patagonia outdoor clothing company made this video to explain why it tries to follow ethical business practices and why that sets it apart.

Do these jeans make me look unethical?

In [another study](#), we had 402 adults participate in an online experiment. As part of a shopping task, this group, which averaged 38 years old and included slightly more women than men, read about a pair of jeans. Half of them saw jeans made by adults. The others saw jeans made by children.

Consistent with our other findings, people who saw the child-labour jeans were significantly less likely to remember this

detail compared with people who had seen the jeans made by adults.

Notably, participants who saw the child-labour jeans said they felt more uncomfortable. We determined that this desire to not feel uncomfortable again led participants to forget about the child labour detail.

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I don't remember and I feel fine

In [another online experiment](#), we presented 341 adults (with the same demographic profile) with one of two scenarios.

Half of them read about a consumer who, when trying to recall a description of jeans they were interested in purchasing, forgot whether the jeans were ethically made. The other half read about a consumer who instead remembered whether the jeans were made ethically, but chose to ignore this information.

It turns out that participants judged consumers less harshly for buying jeans they forgot were made by children rather than when they remembered but ignored this information.

So, maybe consumers forget when products are made unethically so they can buy what they want without feeling (as) guilty.

Reminding consumers

How can marketers help consumers make more ethical choices?

One possibility is to continually remind them, even at point of purchase, of their products' ethical attributes. That is what companies such as [Everlane](#), a clothing company that has built social responsibility into its business model, and the outdoor apparel giant [Patagonia](#) already do.

Also, companies can concentrate on the bright side, describing how happy their well-paid workers are and how their contractors are good environmental stewards instead of pointing out the bad things their competitors do. Based on what we learned, that approach would make ethical consumers less likely to subconsciously dodge this issue.

How can consumers make more ethical choices?

For starters, they can forget about relying on their memories when they shop. They can use guides like the one [Project Just](#) has created to assess their next purchase, and they can also make notes to themselves about brands to avoid. The key is to realise our memories are not perfect and that shopping without a plan may lead us away from our values.

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