

## Consumers' Attitudes towards Eco-labels

*Eivind Sto\* and Marthe Austgulen\*\**

*This Briefing Paper is based on the information drawn from consumers' perceptions of and attitudes towards environmental standards and eco-labels in the textiles and clothing (T&C) industry. The survey was undertaken in five European countries: Germany, England, France, Sweden and Norway. It deals with consumer practices and attitude towards environmental standards and eco-labels in T&C sector.*

Sustainability challenges in the textile industry are many and complex, and the need for sustainable changes has been placed at the political agenda. One of the most popular solutions proposed is the use of eco-labels on textiles. The amount of eco-labels created for, or adapted to, the textile market has been growing since the early 1980s. However, few eco-labelled textiles are available for purchase in stores.

This Briefing Paper presents and discusses results from a recent consumer survey about consumers' perceptions of and attitudes towards eco-labels on textiles. The survey was undertaken in five European countries: Germany, England, France, Sweden and Norway. A more thorough description and analysis of the survey data can be found in the report 'Consumer perspectives on eco-labelling of textiles' (Austgulen 2013).

The data was collected through TNS' web panels (CAWI) in the respective countries. The panels consist of pre-recruited selection of respondents who are willing to participate in surveys and who have access to computers with internet. The size of panels indicates that it is possible to draw representative samples.

In Norway, the sample is randomly selected, in the other countries quota sampling is used. The respondents' background characteristics are already known, and are used to target the survey to the existing target group.

The panel samples are pre-stratified by age, gender and residence, and the respondents are randomly selected within these groups. The sample includes approximately 1000 respondents from each country. The final selections are weighed by age and gender per country. The data was collected during March 14-21, 2012. To our knowledge, no big environmental scandals in the T&C industry, which might have influenced the answers, had happened in this period in any of the participating countries.

The results from the survey demonstrate significant variation in consumers' awareness about the relevant labels for textiles and a significant variation in consumers' attitudes and practices related to eco-labelling of textiles.

One finding is that global and large regional labels, such as the EU Flower and GOTS are less known among consumers surveyed than national and smaller regional labels like the Nordic Swan and the Blue Angel. The results also show that

\* Director of Research, National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO)

\*\* Researcher, National Institute for Consumer Research (SIFO)

very few respondents have seen the relevant eco-labels on textiles, demonstrating that the current use of eco-labels on textiles is limited. The respondents from Norway seem to be the least knowledgeable about the global labels, while German respondents seem to be the most knowledgeable. This indicates differences within the European market for eco-labelled textiles.

Even though the eco-labelled textiles available for purchase is limited, a significant share of respondents in all five countries state that they are taking environmental considerations when buying textiles. A principal component of the analysis shows that respondents that claim to take environmental considerations when buying textiles also claim to take fair trade and health considerations.

An interesting question touched upon in the report is: which factors affect the consumers to emphasise these considerations when buying textiles? The analysis demonstrates that the respondents' willingness to pay, the availability of eco-labelled products and whether or not the respondents had already bought eco-labelled products are the most significant explanatory factors in all countries.

Another finding presented in the report reveals that approximately 50 percent of respondents in all countries agree to the statement "I think that I have a responsibility as a consumer to buy products that are as

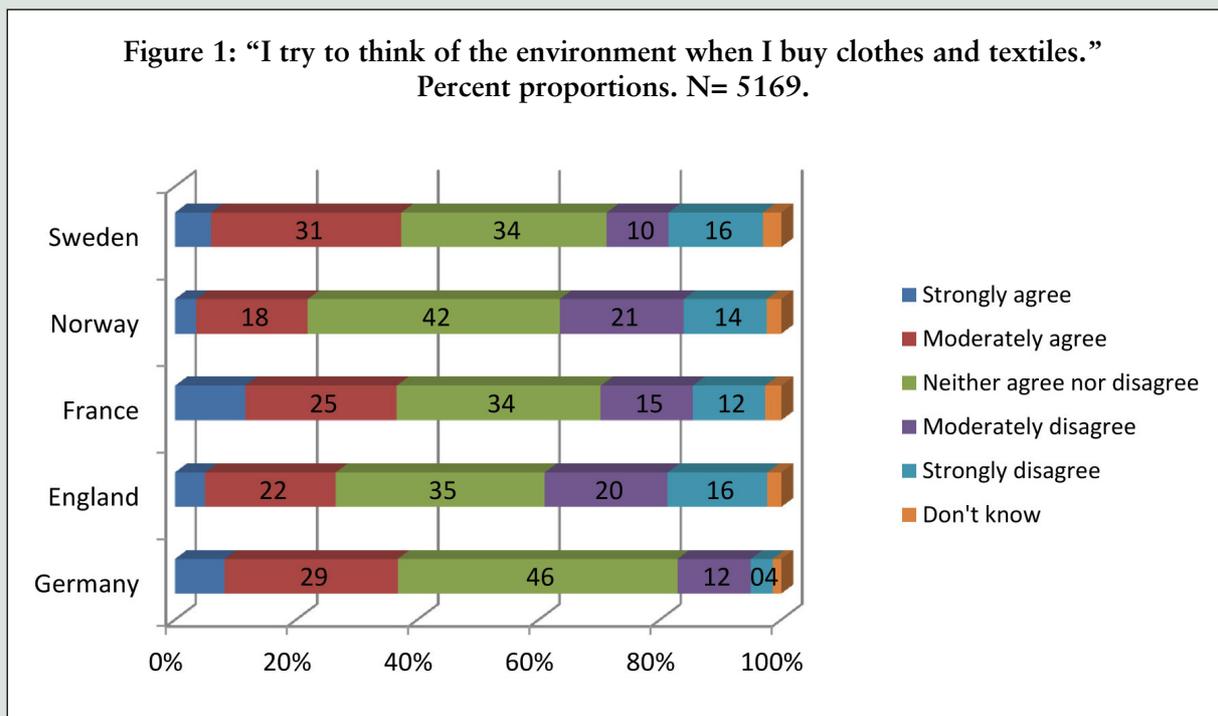
environmentally friendly as possible". This indicates that there is a market for eco-labelled textiles in all countries studied.

## Environmental Considerations among Consumers

This section is built on two questions from the consumer survey. The first question relates to environmental considerations when buying clothes; and the second relates to the evaluation of the best strategies to reduce the environmental impact of textile consumption.

Overall, a fair share of the respondents in all countries states that they try to think of the environment when they are buying clothing and textiles (Figure 1). From 23 percent of the Norwegian respondents to 37 percent of the Swedish respondents answer that they either moderately or strongly agree with the statement. However, 46 percent in Germany and 42 percent in Norway neither agree nor disagree on this statement.

Based on Figure 1, we can see that the Norwegian respondents are the ones that report to be the least concerned about the environment when buying clothes and textiles. The respondents from Germany, France and Sweden are the ones most concerned. More women than men, and more old people than young people, state that they try to think of the environment.



These numbers can be seen in relation to results from the Euro barometer from 2012 (149-151) on a question about environmental impact and purchasing decisions. The consumers were asked whether the environmental impact of a product/service had an influence on their purchasing decision during the week prior to the interview.

29 percent of respondents said that the environmental impact influenced their purchasing decision while for the large majority of 69 percent the environmental impact had no influence on their choice. The percentages of respondents answering “yes” were the following for the respective countries: 29 percent in Germany, 22 percent in the UK, 33 percent in France, 24 percent in Norway and 40 percent in Sweden.

These results thus correspond to the results from our survey on environmental considerations when buying T&C.

It is interesting to note that many respondents in all countries think that buying fewer clothes were the best strategy. This could indicate that there is some understanding among consumers that the production process of T&C is environmentally problematic.

There also seems to be an understanding among respondents regarding the challenges of the use-phase, as around one-third of respondents chooses extending the life-span of clothes as their primary strategy.

At the same time, very few respondents think that washing clothes less often is the best strategy for the environment; although many Life Cycle Assessment studies on clothing show that the use phase is the most energy demanding phase (Dahllöf 2004 and Madsen et al. 2007 in Laitala and Klepp 2012). Buying eco-labelled clothes and textiles were rated as the best strategy by between 15 percent of the respondents in Norway, and 29 percent of the respondents in Germany.

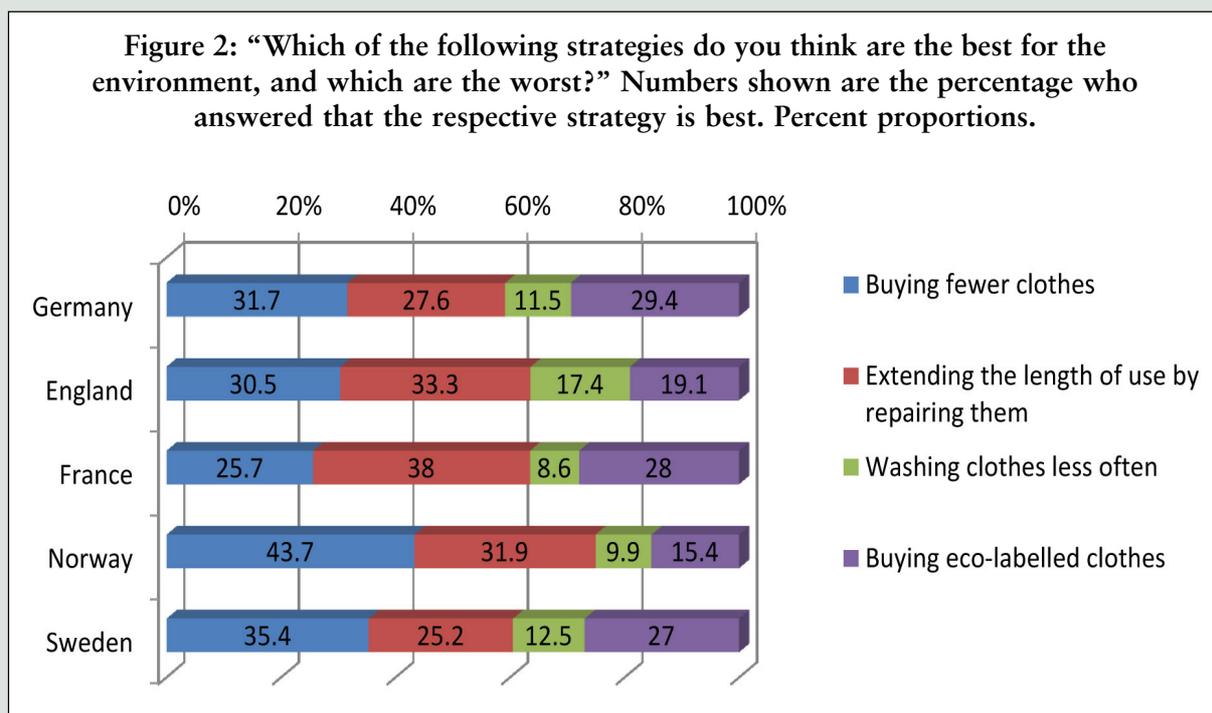
## Consumer Practices

When we move to reported consumer practices (Figures 3 and 4), the relatively positive picture established in 6.1 is definitely questioned. These figures are based upon questions where consumers are asked to compare the environmental considerations with other considerations taken when buying clothes and textiles.

In Figure 3, the importance of environmental considerations is rated compared with price, quality, design, health, colour and fair trade.

Figure 4 shows aggregated results from respondents in all countries to a similar question on the importance of different considerations when buying clothes and textiles.

Consumption of clothing and textiles is, for many, a part of their daily life and routines. Clothes satisfy a wide variety of consumers’



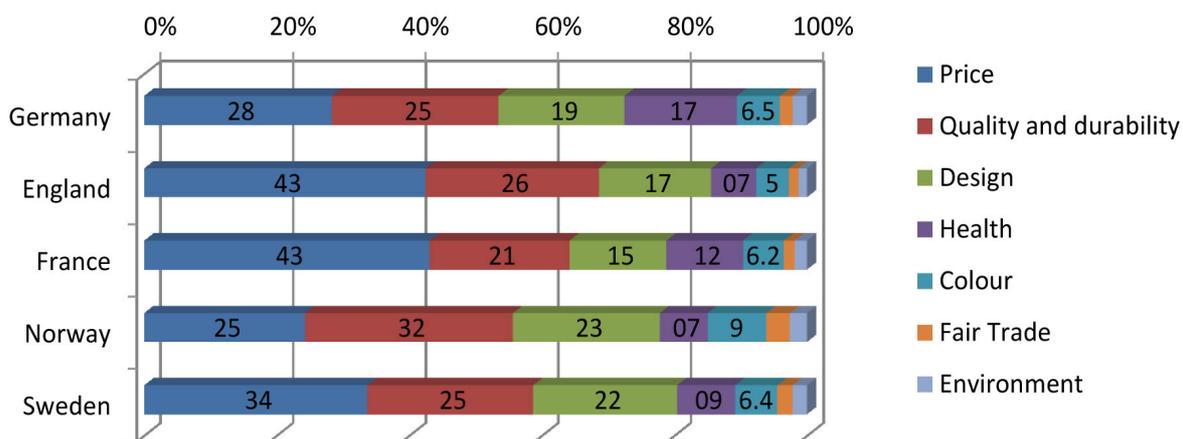
needs as they define a person's role in social groups or are a part of a person's expression of life-style.

According to Arnt Meyer (2001:320) consumers' general textile decision process follows a specific order: at first, consumers take those products into consideration that they like because of their visual appearance (colour, shape, style). Second, they try on the product (fit, wearing, and comfort) and check the price in relation to performance. The most important criteria in terms of cost and benefit are thus appearance, functionality and price (Meyer 2001:321-321).

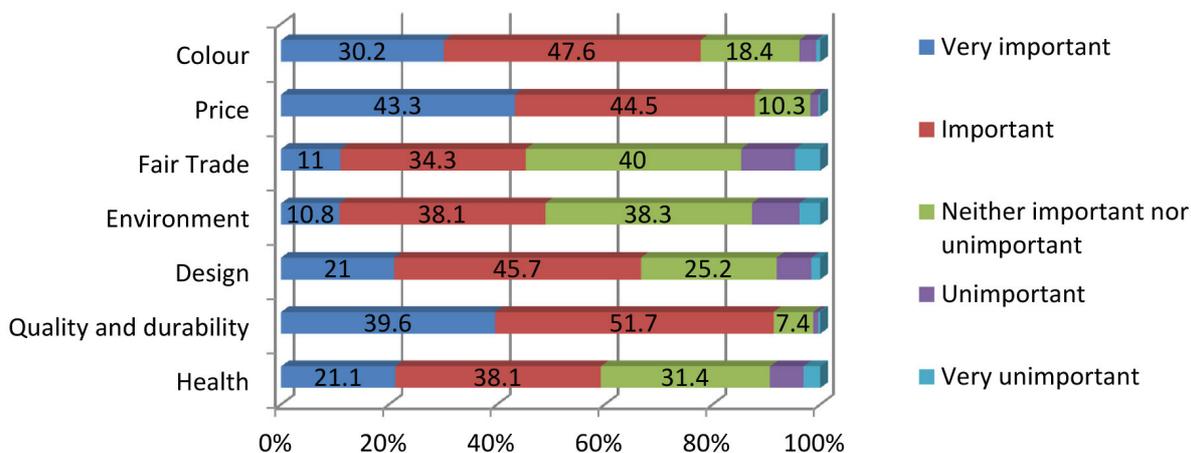
Figure 3 illustrates that almost none of the respondents rate environment or fair trade as the most important considerations when buying clothes. Most of the respondents regard price, quality and durability as very important or important considerations when buying clothes and textiles.

A similar pattern is evident in Figure 4, when the respondents were not asked to rate the considerations. Environment and fair trade are considered least important among the respondents. Around 80 percent of the respondents regard price, quality and colour as

**Figure 3: "Think about the last time you were buying clothes for yourself or someone in your household. How concerned were you about the following aspects?" Numbers shown are the percentage who answered that the respective interest is their first priority.**



**Figure 4: "Considerations when buying clothing and textiles." Percent proportions. Respondents answering "don't know" have been excluded. Total N = 5076.**



important compared with less than 50 percent for fair trade and environment.

## Consumer Attitudes towards Eco-labels in General

We will start with consumer attitudes towards the use of eco-labels in general (not specific for eco-labels on textiles), before we move to trust aspect of the labels.

In order to understand consumers' attitudes towards (eco-)labelling of T&C, it is necessary to examine respondents' attitudes to labelling of products. In order to get an impression of whether the respondents have an active approach to product labeling, we asked the respondents to consider the statement "labelling helps me make better choices when I am shopping".

Figure 5 illustrates that a large share of respondents in all countries answered that they strongly or moderately agreed with the statement. Based on the number of respondents who answered that they strongly agreed with the statement, the French respondents are the most positive to the use of eco-labels, while the Norwegian and English respondents are the least positive.

By comparison, a Euro barometer survey from 2009 on Europeans' attitudes towards the

issue of sustainable consumption and production shows that almost half (47 percent) of EU citizens said that eco-labelling plays an important role in their purchasing decisions, and that eco-labelling plays a more important role in the purchasing decisions of women, the over 38 years-old, those with the highest level of education and the self-employed (Euro barometer 2009:18, 20).

Another way of studying respondents' general attitudes to labelling is to connect it to a question of trust. Labelling in itself is an attempt to create trust among consumers, and labelling schemes are used to document certain characteristics of the product and to certify this documentation.

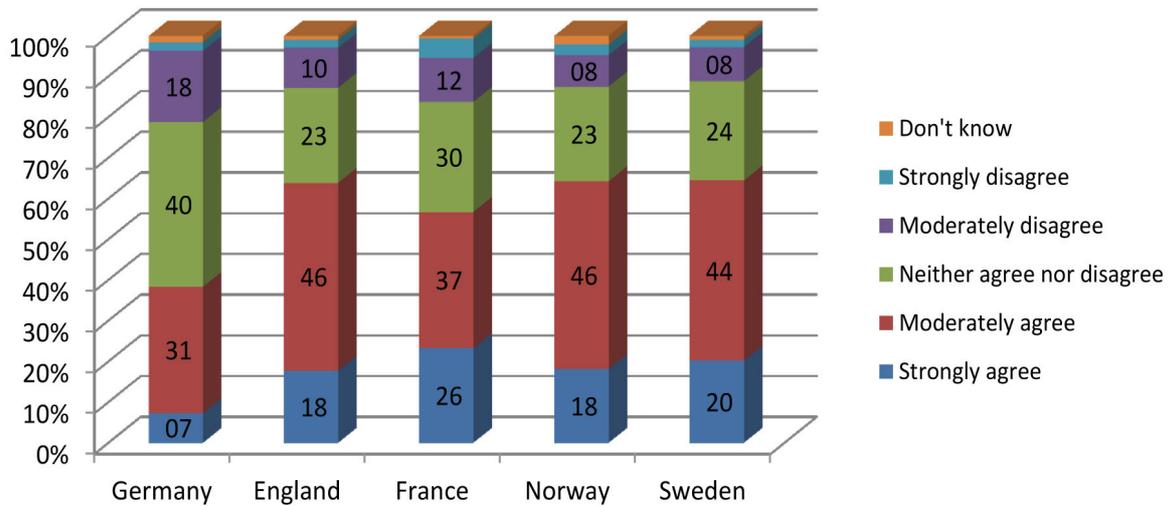
There are reasons to believe that people will have greater confidence on certain labels than others, so general questions like the following must therefore be interpreted as a more general attitude to labels as a communicative tool.

We asked the respondents to consider the statement "I trust that the information on labels on products is true". A significant share of the respondents in all countries answered that they either strongly or moderately agreed with the statement, ranging from 37 percent in Germany to 64 percent in Sweden.

Few respondents (ranging from 11 percent in Sweden to almost 20 percent in Germany)



**Figure 6: “I trust that the information on labels on products is true.”**  
 Percent proportions. Total N= 5175. Sign.p<.000 (Pearson’s Chi-Square)



disagreed with the statement. However, quite a few of respondents answered that they neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. The response pattern is illustrated in Figure 6.

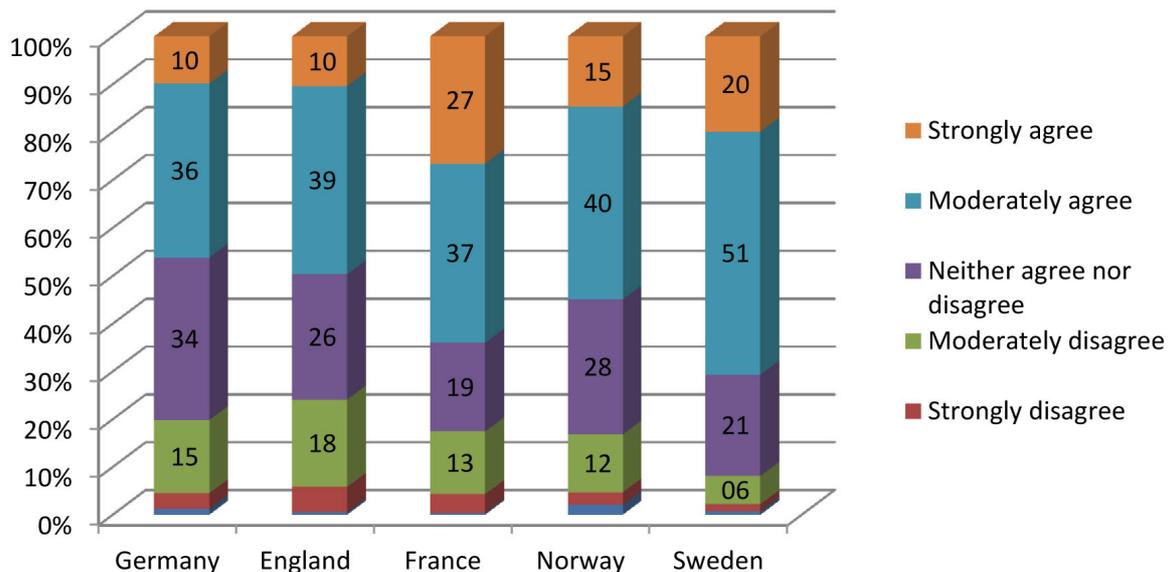
A third and a very important indicator of consumer knowledge about and attitudes towards labels is whether there are many labels they do not know the meaning of. We often speak about “a jungle of labels” and consumers may be confused with so many eco-labels.

As mentioned earlier, labels have become a

popular way of informing the consumer and to make him/her responsible for both social and political issues, but the whole purpose with the single label is lost if the consumers do not know it or do not understand what it means. We, therefore, asked the respondents to consider the statement “There are many labels I don’t know the meaning of”.

Figure 7 shows that a large share of respondents answers that they agree with the statement. The most confused consumers can be

**Figure 7 «There are many labels I do not know the meaning of.”**  
 Percent proportions. Total N= 5189. Sign. P<.000 (Pearson’s Chi-Square)



found in Sweden and France, and the least confused can be found in Germany. The national differences are statistically significant.

Overall, these statements reflecting the general attitudes towards labels indicate that a large majority of respondents use eco-labels as a guide for their purchasing decisions. A majority of respondents also report that they trust the information on the labels, but a substantial share of respondents expresses uncertainty when asked to consider the trust statement.

A majority of respondents also expresses confusion over the existing labels as there are many labels that they do not know the meaning of. The combination of confusion because of “a jungle of labels” and a weak mistrust on the information on the labels might weaken the meaning and effect of the labels in general.

It is, however, important to consider the above mentioned results as general statements, which can be challenging for respondents to answer correctly to.

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