

MODELLING ETHICALITY IN CONSUMPTION: BRIDGING THE LITERATURE ON ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the western world has observed the growing popularity and gradual consolidation of the ethical consumers who express ethical concerns through consumption. Research efforts to model the ethical consumer mostly draw on attitude-intention models and ignore existing ethical decision making models in the business and consumer context. Also, a major issue in this field is the attitude-behaviour gap, where consumers claim to be ethically concerned, but do not behave accordingly. To overcome these issues, we propose a new model drawing from a number of models in the general field of ethics and marketing.

The present paper broadens the domain of ethical consumer decision making by taking into account different models that have been studied in the broader field of ethics and marketing, that could allow us to further advance the explanatory ability of existing ethical consumer decision making models such as the widely used models of Ferrell & Gresham, (1985), Trevino (1986), Rest (1986), Hunt & Vitell (1986) among others.

One of the main contributions of this model is that decision making does not only refer to the evaluation of a specific ethical behaviour, but also to the recognition and evaluation of the ethical issue related to this behaviour. Thus, the enactment of the behaviour should be examined in relation to the recognition and evaluation of an ethical issue.

A review of the extant literature on ethical consumer behaviours allowed us to identify other variables that might influence the process of evaluation of a moral issue. For instance, previous studies acknowledged that ethical consumer behaviours might be a form of constructing a self-identity (Shaw & Shiu, 2002). Also, relying on empirical studies and previous models on ethical consumers, we have identified variables that can play their part on the evaluation of specific ethical behaviours:

- the expected effectiveness of the behaviour
- the ethical value of the behaviour and
- the fit between the behaviour and the ethical self of the individual

Finally, a number of empirical studies in the ethical consumer field discuss the issue of information and information search. However, it has not been included in any model as a construct of importance until the moment. For instance, a large number of studies suggest that the absence of relevant information reduces the likelihood of ethical consumer behaviour (Mohr et al., 2001; Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004). Also, new technologies and the Internet facilitate the dissemination of information on corporate practices and ethical alternatives in the marketplace (Chatzidakis & Mitussis, 2007). This implies that the type of informational search (passive or active) and the information gathered can play an important role both in the recognition and evaluation of the ethical issue (e.g. animal cruelty) and the evaluation of the ethical action (e.g. boycotts). Media coverage draws attention on certain issues (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), whereas repeated exposure to moral issues facilitates their recognition (Gautschi & Jones, 1998).

This research effort is currently at the data collection phase. The first empirical results will be available for presentation early in April and well before the annual AMS conference.

References available upon request