Unveiling ethical product features: The importance of an elaborated information presentation

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing consumer awareness of ethical consumption, market sales are not growing accordingly. Because the presentation of appropriate ethical product information may influence consumers to choose ethical products, this paper analyses the requirements necessary for the successful communication of ethical product features. Based on McGuire’s (1976) information-processing model, and a review of current literature, the information’s comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and credibility are investigated in an online survey of US American citizens (n = 595) for two product categories representing Fast Moving Consumer Goods, and durable goods. A generalized mixed logit model revealed that all three communication factors affect consumers’ choices. The more concerns about, or expertise in, organic production and fair trade purchase the consumers expressed, the less important their price sensibility and the more they preferred a comprehensive addendum and credible sources (e.g., government certificate or traceability). The results strongly suggest that advertisers and marketers can customize product communications in order to better engage both the mass market, and ethically oriented consumers.

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1. Introduction

Ecological problems, resource exploitation and poor human working conditions are increasingly gaining global attention (Gleim et al., 2013). For a long time, this has been addressed by a focus on environmental aspects of production and consumption. Given the described multifaceted problems, an expansion to ethical production and consumption is indicated, which considers the fulfillment of human rights and animal welfare in addition to environmental protection (Doane, 2001).

Hence, businesses need to engage with products and production methods which fulfill ethical criteria. Accordingly, they are spending more on the advertising of ethical products and services (Minton et al., 2013). Nevertheless, businesses alone cannot succeed in aiming for more environmentally and socially responsible practices. Consumer compliance is also a major contributor to this success because if consumers’ purchase decisions do not include environmental and social aspects, and related production methods, products and services will fail in the market. While there has been an increase in mindful consumption, which refers to consumers with a mind-set of caring for themselves, their community and nature, leading to consumption that optimizes their wellbeing and values (Sheth et al., 2011), it is often reported that ethical consumption is considerably lower than consumers’ ethical concerns may suggest (Doorn and Verhoef, 2015; Tseng and Hung, 2013). Amongst others, this phenomenon is referred to as the ‘Ethical Purchasing Gap’ (Nicholls and Lee, 2006) or environmental/social ‘value-action gap’ (Chung and Leung, 2007). The gap between verbal and actual commitment to ethical consumption is well described in the literature, and several approaches have been investigated in an effort to close this gap. Within this context, marketing has been identified as important to continuously gaining consumer awareness about ethical issues, and to achieving a shift to more environmental and socially responsible consumption patterns (Osburg et al., 2016a). Guiding consumers towards more ethical consumption is therefore an important task of marketing research, practice, and communications.

To achieve a shift to more ethical consumption, consumer
awareness about its importance is a major requirement (Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007). This awareness has different roots: On the one hand, awareness can be raised by situational signs, i.e., through marketing communications or other forms of product communication (e.g., ethical labels, information on product packaging). On the other hand, awareness about ethical consumption can also be the result of a personality trait, and for example be driven by a consumer’s concerns and habits (Doorn and Verhoef, 2015).

With respect to raising consumer awareness through situational signs, different approaches can be used to inform consumers about a product’s ethical features. Labels deliver ethical information in an aggregated way and they represent an established approach in science and consumer behaviour research (Vecchio and Annunziata, 2015). Further, a detailed product information presentation (e.g., consumers’ information retrieval at the Point of Sale through the support of technological applications such as entering an identifier or scanning a bar code) has recently been discussed as an alternative approach, being particularly suitable for high-involvement purchases or product choices, where consumer acceptance is threatened (Osburg et al., 2016a). Current research indicates that the presentation of product information can be a moderator on consumer’s ethical product choices, at least for consumers who care about these issues (Osburg et al., 2016a). Independent of the chosen approach, consumers’ purchase decisions often do not seem to include ethical considerations (Bray et al., 2011), indicating that ethical aspects need to become more salient for an individual consumer.

While many previous studies have focused on the information content or selection of appropriate ethical labels (e.g., Cai and Aguilar, 2013; Didier and Lucie, 2008), little attention has been given to how ethical product information should best be framed (i.e., which characteristics ethical product information should fulfill) so that consumers consider it in their purchase decisions. This paper therefore explores whether an elaborate framing of ethical product information is more effective compared with the conventional approach of disclosing ethical information. Additionally, this study investigates the best message framing for both the mass market, and for ethically concerned consumers. Our research therefore addresses an under-researched area of marketing communications, i.e., the framing of ethical messages, by building on an established information-processing framework (McGuire, 1976). This understanding will be of relevance for the research streams about ethical product information disclosure, i.e., labelling (e.g., Thompson et al., 2010; Vecchio and Annunziata, 2015), and traceability (e.g., Hobbs et al., 2005; Osburg et al., 2016a). It will also contribute towards the discussion about how to best target either the mass market or a special eco-niche (Osburg et al., 2016b). Furthermore, this research provides insights into why businesses’ growing expenditure on ethical advertising may not yet have transformed into more ethical consumer choices (Tseng and Hung, 2013). The results provide marketing practitioners with recommendations about how to frame ethical product information in order to disclose information, which actually affects consumer choices.

The remaining article is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews important characteristics of message framing for ethical products based on an overview of current literature. The identified characteristics are summarized in a conceptual framework, which is then tested in an empirical study. The methodological approach is introduced in Section 3, while Section 4 presents the results of the online survey. This paper concludes with a discussion of marketing implications for the framing of ethical product information, and suggestions for further research in the area of marketing communications.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

The following presents a literature overview about how the framing of ethical product information may help increase consumer choices of ethical products. To identify message framing criteria, McGuire’s (1976) information-processing framework is reviewed. Based on this, the following three criteria are identified, and their influence on consumer choices is considered based on current literature: comprehensibility, meaningfulness, and credibility. Furthermore, the price of ethical products and the costs of information disclosure are included as a fourth characteristic, given that price represents a main barrier for ethical consumption (Doorn and Verhoef, 2015).

Overall, the paper restricts ethical issues to fair trade and environmental protection because these issues are relevant for all product categories. Different product categories are also considered as the importance of ethical features varies among these categories (Wheale and Hinton, 2007). In light of investigating product information communication, a consideration of both, high- and low-involvement purchase decisions was indicated because this also impacts ethical product choices.

2.1. Consumers’ information processing

It is important to consider the full consumer decision path to better understand consumer choices, and classic paradigms provide a useful guide for a deep investigation (Batra and Keller, 2016). McGuire’s (1976) information-processing framework describes eight steps which ultimately affect consumer choices by being related to an individual’s personality: Exposure, perception, comprehension, agreement, retention, retrieval, decision making and action. As the focus of the current research is on the framing of ethical product information, only those steps which marketing communications can use to create impactful ethical product information have been reviewed. Contrary to the model’s strict sequence, current research indicates that consumers may go through interacting steps (Batra and Keller, 2016). Therefore, it becomes essential to assess how marketing communications can address the identified characteristics simultaneously.

According to the information-processing model (McGuire, 1976), perception refers to the selective processing of information; hence, consumers draw their attention only to a small subset of the information they are exposed to. Consequently, it is crucial to provide information, which an individual perceives as worth considering. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986), suggests that consumers who value ethical product information (i.e., individuals following the central route of information processing) are expected to require an elaborated information presentation, which ultimately leads to a detailed understanding of the ethical cause. Hence, comprehensibility represents the first important characteristic of ethical product information. The next step is comprehension of what is perceived, and points to the fact that “one must go beyond mere perception and effectively encode the information in one’s meaning system so that one can grasp its import” (p. 306). This illustrates the importance of providing individuals with information, which is meaningful to them. Furthermore, McGuire (1976) highlights the importance of agreement with what is comprehended. Although comprehensible and meaningful information can be disclosed to individuals, the information will not be further processed if an individual doubts its truth. Hence, credibility emerges as the third characteristic for framing product information.

In summary, McGuire’s (1976) information-processing model points to three characteristics of ethical product information, marketing communication should focus on when framing ethical
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