



Antecedents of ethical consumption activities in Germany and the United States

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ABSTRACT

This study developed an index of ethical consumption activities, applied it to samples of young consumers from Germany ($n = 225$) and the United States ($n = 267$), and explored the role of national culture and other factors that theoretically determine these behaviors. Contrary to expectations, the German respondents reported fewer ethical consumption activities than did those from the US and female subjects did not consume more ethically than males. Religiosity had only a weak relationship with ethical consumption activities. Consistent with the hypotheses, both respondent idealism and social engagement behaviors were significant predictors of ethical consumption. These findings add to the literature on sustainable consumption and consumer responsibility by challenging conventional understanding of cross-national and gendered differences.

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1. Introduction

The expression, “ethical consumerism,” gained wide notice with the March, 1989, inaugural issue of *Ethical Consumer* magazine, published in the UK (Irving et al., 2002). This term and its cognates (ethical consumption, ethical purchasing) refer to spending that makes a positive difference in the world. Ethical consumer issues include protecting the natural environment through energy efficiency at home, eating organic and caring for the welfare of animals, supporting fair trade and worker’s rights, boycotting products from oppressive regimes, opposing nuclear power and armaments, making ethical investments, and other concerns, such as choosing eco-travel and responsible tourism (Goodwin and Francis, 2003). We define ethical consumption along similar lines but more explicitly consider post-purchase activities. That is, ethical consumption goes beyond shopping choices and covers both product use and product disposal (Nicosia and Mayer, 1976). Ethical consumers may choose to be frugal in their use of energy and consequently turn down lights and furnaces or plan errands to minimize the number of car trips. They may also weigh the environmental costs of discarding dead batteries and worn out electronic devices and keep an eye open for safer reuse or recycling opportunities. Although ethical consumers may share some of the ideology and practices of “voluntary simplifiers” (Etzioni,

1998; Shaw and Newholm, 2002), they are not radically anti-consumption and, in the final analysis, remain active shoppers, albeit ones who bring moral, non-economic considerations into their purchasing (Szmigin and Carrigan, 2006).

Over the past 20 years, a small but growing research literature has addressed the topic of ethical consumption (Harrison et al., 2005). Levels of analysis have ranged from in-depth, interpretive studies of individual consumers to macromarketing inquiries about the interrelationships among marketing practices, marketing systems, and environmental sustainability (Kilbourne et al., 1997), and of consumer practices and responsibilities within the domain of sustainable consumption (Schaefer and Crane, 2005). This paper approaches the topic through survey research methods and from a sociological perspective. It presents an empirical study of ethical consumption activities, and their antecedents, among young consumers from two different countries: Germany and the United States. The aim of this research is to investigate, through cross-national samples of business students, some of the factors that propel tangible ethical consumption conduct rather than attitudes or intentions toward its praxis. Does a respondent’s national culture, gender, religiosity, social engagement, and personal philosophy make a difference in his or her purchasing? These young consumers are of special interest because their behavioral patterns today may continue for many years. Moreover, some of them will become managers making business decisions that will have social, environmental, and other consequences with a moral dimension (Aspen Institute, 2008).

The following section presents the model under investigation and then proffers five hypotheses based upon the supporting

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literatures. Next we describe the questionnaire design and data collection procedures, report the empirical findings, discuss their meaning, and conclude with suggestions for further investigation.

2. Theory and hypotheses

Fig. 1 proposes an exploratory model wherein five different variables – national culture, gender, religiosity, social engagement, and personal philosophy – influence ethical consumption activities. A priori, the direction of causality should run from each of these variables to ethical consumption. That is, national culture and gender are, for most people, enduring qualities and not dependent upon particular circumstances for activation (Rosenberg, 1968). They are definitely antecedent variables. Similarly, religiosity and extent of social engagement would appear to be more central and immutable as individual characteristics than would be ethical consumption practices. Perhaps, through a process of attribution, ethical consumers can develop a personal philosophy that follows from prior acts of virtuous shopping, but this too seems less likely than core ideology coming first, and then buyer behavior. These five variables are all assumed to operate independently upon ethical consumption activities. They are probably not completely unrelated – religious attendance, for example, can be an indicator of social engagement – but the literature examined does not provide sufficient empirical evidence to warrant building a model wherein one variable is a causal influence on another that, in turn, affects ethical consumption.

2.1. National culture

Despite some well-deserved skepticism about using the nation-state as the unit of cross-cultural analysis (Cayla and Arnould, 2008; Usunier and Lee, 2005, pp. 12–13), major international organizations break down their social and economic indicators by country and the assumption that national culture can express itself through consumer behavior (à la Hofstede, 1991) remains deeply embedded in the field of international marketing. A variety of opinion surveys, performance indexes, and sales data indicate that national culture may be an important determinant of ethical consumption activities. This evidence suggests that US consumers

may not be as virtuous as others. In terms of their environmental attitudes and fair trade spending, for example, Americans seem to be laggards compared to consumers in other developed countries, especially those in Western Europe (Etzioni, 1998). Indeed, the use of “ethical” as an adjective modifying consumption appears to be rather uncommon in the US where some politicians, pundits, and talk radio hosts tout opinions openly hostile to the environment and scoff at animal rights and other ethical concerns. With some exceptions (Witkowski, 2005), very few scholarly articles on fair trade have originated in the US. The works cited herein on ethical consumption were mainly authored by UK and European based academics and writers.

As shown in Table 1, a cross-national survey found that fewer Americans were personally concerned with global warming than were respondents from 14 other nations (Pew Research Center, 2006). In particular, whereas 30% of Germans showed “a great deal” of personal concern, only 19% of Americans did so. Similarly, the German sub-sample in Eisler et al. (2003) scored higher than their American counterparts on three separate scales measuring environmental attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. These survey findings have had political ramifications. Germany has had a reasonably successful Green Party and ad hoc citizen’s associations (*Bürgerinitiativen*) everywhere have lobbied local councils on environmental issues (Ardagh, 1995, p. 548). Today, environmentalism is deeply embedded within all German politics and the country has become an environmental leader reducing greenhouse gas emissions between 1990 and 2005 by 18%, whereas those of the US went up to 16% (Blue/Schwandorf, 2008). Yale University’s Environmental Performance Index, which employs a “proximity-to-target” methodology, holds 149 countries accountable for their progress towards 25 policy goals. In 2008, Germany ranked 13th; whereas the US placed 39th (Yale University, 2008). During the preceding years, the agendas of US environmental groups were often subverted by a sometimes openly antagonistic federal government.

Based on surveys in Germany ($n = 486$) and the US ($n = 247$), Witkowski et al. (2006) found that German respondents felt more informed about, assigned greater importance to, and reported more purchasing of both organic and fair trade foods than their US counterparts. At \$104.5 million, total US fair trade sales in 2002 exceeded Germany’s at \$88.4, but this was not an impressive figure given that the US population is over three and a half times greater. Fair trade sales in the UK and tiny Switzerland in 2002

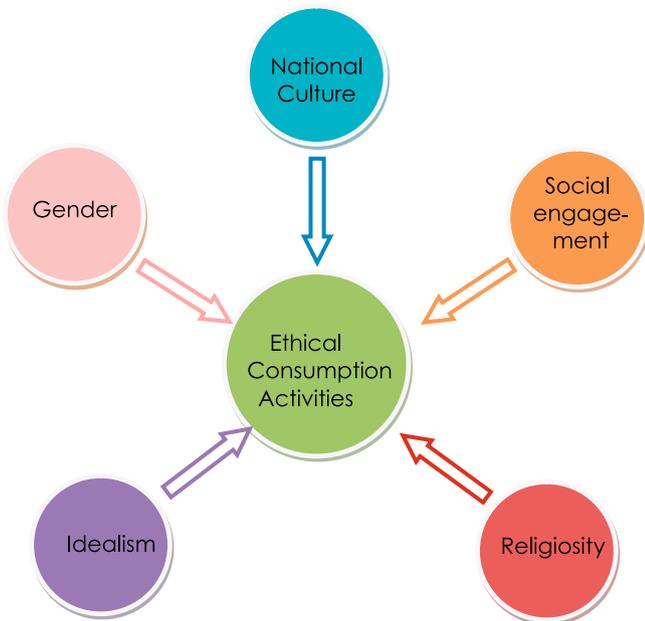


Fig. 1. Antecedents of ethical consumption activities.

Table 1
Cross-national attitudes toward global warming (based upon those who have heard about the “environmental problem of global warming”).

Country	Personally concerned			
	A great deal (%)	A fair amount (%)	Not at all (%)	Do not know (%)
United States	19	34	47	1
France	46	41	14	0
Germany	30	34	36	1
Great Britain	26	41	32	1
Spain	51	34	14	2
Russia	34	31	34	
Egypt	24	51	23	1
Indonesia	28	48	23	1
Jordan	26	40	34	
Pakistan	31	25	39	5
Turkey	41	29	23	8
Nigeria	45	33	20	2
China	20	41	37	2
India	65	20	13	2
Japan	66	27	7	0

Source: Pew Research Center (2006).

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