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 behavior 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
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 as the unit of cross-cultural analysis (Cayla and Arnould, 2008). 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.

![Fig. 1. Antecedents of ethical consumption activities.](source)

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Personally concerned</th>
<th>A great deal (%)</th>
<th>A fair amount (%)</th>
<th>Not at all (%)</th>
<th>Do not know (%)</th>
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