

Chapter 1

Ethical Consumption: The Role of Emotions in the Purchase of Fair Trade Apparel Products

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on ethical consumption, analyzing the mechanisms behind the purchase preferences for fair trade apparel products through an investigation of the role of emotions. The results of an experimental study show that consumer preference for a fair-trade clothing item is driven by the recall of an unethical action and the emotional state aroused by it. The authors hypothesize that recalling an unethical action would trigger a negative emotional reaction in consumers, which, in turn, would increase their preference for a product carrying the fair-trade certification versus a product carrying a more traditional quality certification. Contrition has emerged as the negative emotion that mediates the effect of recalling an unethical action on product choice. The results shed light on a compensatory mechanism whereby consumers alleviate negative emotions arising from recalling an unethical behavior they had engaged in by making an ethical purchase.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, public opinion's attention toward the issue of ethical consumption, often referred to as "responsible" or "conscious" consumption, has significantly increased on a worldwide basis, influencing consumer purchasing choices, companies' policies and supply chain management. Indeed, ethical consumption is nowadays commonly associated with the need and the opportunity to preserve social and

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environmental wellbeing. However, ethical consumption encompasses a wider range of concerns, ranging from animal welfare to working condition standards, from human rights to health issues, from human wellbeing to environmental and community sustainability. Ethical consumption may also be associated with non-consumption actions, such as boycotts aimed at punishing companies for their unethical behavior (Pellandini-Simányi, 2014). Indeed, according to Starr (2009, p. 916), ethical consumption can be defined as “purchasing and using products and resources according not only to the personal pleasures and values they provide but also to ideas of what is right and good, versus wrong and bad, in a moral sense”. Interestingly, academic literature has been investigating the ethical consumption phenomenon for quite long time. To illustrate, Mintel (1994) found that consumers’ purchasing decisions are influenced by a wide range of ethical issues, such as oppressive regimes, human rights, labor conditions, environmental issues, irresponsible marketing, animal testing and industrial agriculture. Indeed, consumers nowadays purchase and recommend products also on the basis of brands’ ethical reputation, which has become a determining factor for brand loyalty (Alwi et al., 2017; Forte & Lamont, 1998).

However, given the centrality of ethical consumption in today’s consumers’ life, greenwashing, defined as “the disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016) and, in general, all marketing campaigns aimed at protecting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), thus the achievement of commercial success respecting ethical values, people, communities, and the natural environment (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), may no longer be so influential as in the past. Therefore, in today’s increasingly digitalized world, where transparency often drives choices, companies must keep up with the growing demands for ethical behavior, from employee rights and gender discrimination to the care of the environment. Indeed, worldwide, hundreds of organizations and institutions aimed at researching and promoting ethical business behavior are born. Ethical and social marketing has become a central topic in marketing conferences as well as in academic research. Importantly, the higher the connection between marketing and ethics the higher the need for companies to embrace more ethical processes (Laczniak, 1993).

The Internet, moreover, has paved the way for international consumer groups and organizations to coordinate activities aimed at raising awareness at a global level. For instance, websites such as www.saigon.com/nike or www.mcspotlight.org, platforms of Nike and McDonalds boycott campaigns, are the result of some of these activities. Indeed, if on the one hand consumers are certainly willing to reward, choose and recommend a product or a company for its ethical behavior, on the other hand consumers are ready and able to boycott products or companies, if they are aware about questionable production methods or processes. Importantly, nowadays consumers have also the opportunity to express their concerns through established organization such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth or Amnesty International, which stimulate the growth of boycotts and activist attacks. As a consequence, scholars have started investigating such trends and have recently introduced the concept of consumer “brand sabotage” (Kähr et al., 2016) to indicate consumers who, being empowered by new technologies and driven by negative experiences with a brand, become hostile and determined to cause damage to that brand. Such consumers, known as “saboteurs”, may have a dramatic negative impact on the reputation of a brand.

In response to such growth interest of consumers toward more ethical business practices, most of the companies that had been traditionally considered almost immune to such issues, have been taking serious actions aimed at making a positive societal contribution. For instance, one the first actions that multinational companies have taken to embrace ethics has been the development and the publication of their “codes of conduct” in order to demonstrate to the markets their commitment to social engagement.

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