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From Ethical to Sustainable Consumption: An Exploratory Study of Students' Familiarity with Mindful Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to further the marketer's understanding of ethical consumption by exploring differences in the way people perceive ethical consumption, mindful consumption, and overconsumption. The results support the idea that neither ethical nor mindful consumption designate a clearly defined set of practices. Researchers cannot count on even better-informed consumers to understand the full extent of ethical consumption possibilities or correctly apply more encompassing terms such as mindful consumption or overconsumption. As the construct of ethical consumption broadens to sustainable consumption, researchers will need to carefully operationalize the construct.

INTRODUCTION

There has been renewed interest in recent months in the practice of *ethical consumption*. Within the last half-year, Pope Francis, in the first papal encyclical devoted entirely to environmental issues, called for radical transformation of global economics by means of a reduction in personal consumption accompanied by an increased commitment to more mindful consumption on the parts of people everywhere but especially those in affluent industrialized countries (*Laudato Si*, August 2015).

To consume ethically is to consume products that negatively affect neither man nor the natural world (Brinkman 2004). Ethical consumption had its genesis in the green movement of the 1990s (Sheth *et al.* 2011) but today goes well beyond green (or greener) consumption. It extends to products that, not only through their consumption but also through their production or disposal, may have a deleterious effect on people, society, nature, the environment, and/or animals (Pharr 2015). Broadly speaking, ethical consumption encompasses choices surrounding green or environmentally-friendly products and services (e.g. eco-travel), organic products, local products, natural products such as non-genetically-modified (GMO) foods, products that have not been tested on animals or that avoid animal cruelty, offerings from companies perceived to be high in corporate social responsibility (CSR), and fair trade products, i.e. products made by people whose human rights (such as the right to safe, humane working conditions and non-coerced employment) are legitimized and protected (Witkowski & Reddy 2010).

Most recently, ethical consumption has broadened to encompass the paradigm of “mindful consumption” (Pharr 2015). Mindful consumption is tempered consumptive behavior that ensues from and is reinforced by a mindset that reflects a caring sensitivity toward self, society, and nature (Sheth *et al.* 2011). Mindful consumption is the antithesis of unfettered or overconsumption. Mindful or more responsible consumption was highlighted by Pope Francis

when he called for “an integral ecology made up of simple daily gestures which break the logic of [environmental] exploitation and selfishness” (*Laudato Si*, 2015).

With the emphasis on integral ecology and more mindful consumption, the Pope appears to endorse a kind of robust *sustainability* that encompasses both the production and consumption of goods and services. In the business world, sustainability—the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely—has been most often practiced as procurement procedures and production methods that guard against environmental destruction and/or natural resource eradication (Sheth *et al.* 2011). The encyclical seems to call for a more integral sustainability that spans the value-delivery chain from procurement to production to consumption. Human consumption that consciously and deliberately avoids or seeks to minimize societal and environmental degradation may be thought of as sustainable consumption. Some marketing scholars believe the robust application of sustainability and mindfulness to human consumptive behavior, irrespective of the consumer's focus when purchasing, will emerge as the new face of ethical consumption (Pharr 2015).

Purpose of this Paper

This paper seeks to further the marketer's understanding of ethical consumption by exploring differences in the way people perceive ethical consumption, mindful consumption, and overconsumption. In a recent call for more broad-based, integrative research to help solidify the historically fluid paradigm of ethical consumption, Pharr (2015) makes the case for the need to first refine and better operationalize the construct of ethical consumption. This paper presents the results of exploratory research on upperclassmen business students and their understanding of ethical consumption. The results may be helpful in framing the construct of sustainable consumption going forward.

BODY OF PAPER

While any number of studies purports that ethical consumerism is on the rise (see Bray *et al.* 2011), there remains disagreement over how best to define and operationalize ethical consumption. Ethical consumption may encompass everything from intentional efforts at greener consumption such as buying organic foods, buying locally grown foods, buying energy saving products, and recycling, to efforts at more humane consumption such as buying products that do not harm animals or buying fair trade goods, to more general efforts such as buying from socially responsible companies. In addition to these positive expressions of ethical consumption, some authors include negative practices such as boycotts, drastic reduction of individual consumption, “voluntary simplicity” or anti-consumption, and refraining from purchases of products expressly linked to unjust market practices (Long & Murray 2012) as aspects of ethical consumption.

Still other researchers subsume ethical consumption under the auspices of political consumerism (Wilkinson 2007; Michelletti *et al.* 2007). Political consumerism seeks to intertwine personal consumption and political activity with the goal of effecting public policy and economic change through grass-roots consumer power (Wilkinson 2007). In comparison, political consumerism seems a broader social movement than ethical consumption. Political consumerism includes

many deliberative democratic initiatives and quasi-political practices such as citizen juries, neighborhood councils (Klintman 2009), the development of alternative business or trade systems (Davies 2007), social alliances, protests/marches/rallies, and shareholder activism (Bakker *et al.* 2008) that are not necessarily present in traditional understandings of ethical consumption.

Because the construct of ethical consumption has come to include both engagement and disengagement from consumption as well as positive and negative practices, it may now be more accurate for research purposes to accumulate these various behaviors under the rubric of *ethical consumerism* and develop a separate definition of *ethical consumption*. Pharr (2015) recommends the definition of ethical consumption incorporate positive engagement terms spanning product selection/purchase or use since product “use” in some fashion is implicit in the word “consumption.”

As the paradigm shifts and broadens, it seems instructive to investigate whether average yet informed consumers appear to understand the concept of "mindful consumption" and whether they perceive any link between mindful and ethical consumption. The exploratory research reported in this paper was conducted to explicitly ascertain students' perceptions when simultaneously confronted with the notions of ethical and mindful consumption as well as with and alongside the idea of overconsumption. These aspects were chosen because of their link to sustainability. Are business students (all of whom receive some education in marketing) familiar with the concepts of mindful consumption and overconsumption? Do students perceive the practices of mindful consumption and overconsumption to be dimensions of or related to ethical consumption or are these practices understood differently? Are students' perceptions of mindful consumption and overconsumption as value-laden as perceptions of ethical consumption have historically been?

Methodology and Results

Eighty-one (N=81) undergraduate business students, all of whom had completed at least one course in marketing, were surveyed regarding their familiarity with the concepts of ethical consumption, mindful consumption, and overconsumption. The results were then analyzed by gender and degree of exposure to ethical marketing concepts. Overall, the results showed that students are generally unfamiliar with either the concept of "ethical consumption" or "mindful consumption." Between 55-60 percent of upperclassmen business students said they did not recognize these terms or had never heard of them. Less than half of students, 40-45 percent, said they did recognize these terms or had heard of them. Of those who did recognize the terms, when asked to explain or define the concepts, the number of students able to do so fell to near or below 30 percent, indicating the level of functional knowledge to be about half that of the simple recognition level. In contrast, students claimed much more familiarity with "overconsumption" with 85 percent of students indicating they recognized the term "overconsumption" and 81 percent claiming to know with confidence or be able to define what overconsumption consists of.

The least understood of all the concepts appeared to be "mindful consumption." While some 42 percent of students said they had heard of "mindful consumption," just under one in three students (32%) said they were able to define or explain mindful consumption with confidence.

The proportion claiming familiarity with "ethical consumption" came in only slightly higher at 44 percent with even fewer students (27%) confident they could accurately define ethical consumption. Meanwhile, as mentioned, a full 81 percent of students said they were confident they could explain the inherently more broadly-framed "overconsumption."

When the results were analyzed by gender, some interesting differences emerged. First, women were found to be more familiar with all the concepts than were men. While there was no significant difference between the proportion of men and women claiming to recognize (or fail to recognize) the concept of ethical consumption, women were somewhat more likely to say they were knowledgeable of ethical consumption (31% of women versus 24% of men, $p=.2419$). In addition, women were significantly more likely than men to say they were familiar with mindful consumption (50% of women versus 36% of men, $p=.10204$) and that they could explain or define mindful consumption (42% of women versus 24% of men). A test of proportional differences found the difference between men and women in their abilities to explain mindful consumption to be significant beyond the .05 level ($p=.04182$). In addition, men were also significantly less likely than women to say they had ever engaged in mindful consumption (39% of women versus 31% of men, $p=.22663$) or in overconsumption (81% of women versus 64% of men, $p=.04551$).

While demographic differences as a whole have not been found to be important discriminators of ethical consumption (Doran 2009), the majority of studies have sampled women, presumably because women are often the primary shoppers in households (cf. Pharr 2011). As the mediatization of ethical consumption increases (Eskjaer 2013), it becomes necessary to ascertain whether ethical consumption has focused primarily on convenience and consumable goods at the expense of durable, shopping goods or whether women are being conditioned to engage in ethical consumption at higher rates than men.

The survey results were also analyzed according to whether the students had recently been exposed to concepts of marketing ethics that pertain to the consumer culture and personal consumption. Again, some significant differences emerged. In every case, students who had been exposed within the most recent three-month period to ethical consumption issues were more likely to say they were familiar with ethical consumption, mindful consumption, and overconsumption and more likely to feel confident they could accurately define or explain these concepts. They were also significantly more likely to say they had actually engaged in these practices. Differences between the two groups were moderately significant for all areas of recognition, functional knowledge, and engagement with the exception of familiarity with overconsumption where 80-85 percent of each group claimed familiarity with the concept of overconsumption.

Despite these significant differences, however, overall levels of familiarity with both ethical and mindful consumption remained relatively low. Fewer than half of students in each group said they had ever heard of ethical consumption (45% on average) while even less than that (43% on average) claimed familiarity with mindful consumption. These results appear to indicate that even consumers with informed exposure to the concepts of ethical and mindful consumption remain largely unclear as to the exact nature of either construct. Moreover these results were born out in the number of students who were confident they had personally engaged in either

ethical or mindful consumption. Overall, 28 percent of students claimed to have ever engaged in ethical consumption while this percentage rose to 35 percent for mindful consumption. When students were divided according to their recent exposure to ethical consumption issues, some significant differences emerged. Students who had recently been exposed to ethical consumption issues were more likely to say they had: knowingly engaged in ethical consumption (43% of recent exposed versus 17% of non-exposed); knowingly engaged in mindful consumption (37% of recent exposed versus 33% of non-exposed); and knowingly engaged in overconsumption (80% of recent exposed versus 65% of non-exposed) with significant differences between the two groups in the rate at which each engaged in ethical consumption ($p=.00508$) and overconsumption ($p=.069$), in particular.

Table 1 below shows the exploratory survey results for the overall sample as well as responses broken out by gender and exposure to ethical marketing concepts.

TABLE 1. Overall Survey Results

(N= 81)

MEASURE	Overall Sample		Female (F) v. Male (M)			Recent Exposure (R) v. Non-Exposure (N)		
	Yes	No	Yes	P Value	No	Yes	P Value	No
% Who recognized or had heard Ethical Consumption	44	56	47 (F) 42 (M)	.32636	53 (F) 58 (M)	49 (R) 41 (N)	.23576*	51 (R) 59 (N)
% Who recognized or had heard Mindful Consumption	42	58	50 (F) 36 (M)	.10204**	50 (F) 64 (M)	49 (R) 37 (N)	.14007*	51 (R) 63 (N)
% Who recognized or had heard Overconsumption	85	15	86 (F) 84 (M)	.40129	14 (F) 16 (M)	86 (R) 85 (N)	.40517	14 (R) 15 (N)
% Able to define or explain Ethical Consumption	27	73	31 (F) 24 (M)	.2419*	69 (F) 76 (M)	37 (R) 26 (N)	.14457*	63 (R) 74 (N)
% Able to define or explain Mindful Consumption	32	68	42 (F) 24 (M)	.04182***	58 (F) 76 (M)	34 (R) 30 (N)	.35197	66 (R) 70 (N)
% Able to define or explain Overconsumption	81	19	86 (F) 78 (M)	.17879	14 (F) 22 (M)	83 (R) 80 (N)	.36693	17 (R) 20 (N)
% Who had knowingly engaged in Ethical Consumption	28	72	31 (F) 25 (M)	.27425	69 (F) 75 (M)	43 (R) 17 (N)	.00508 ****	57 (R) 83 (N)
% Who had knowingly engaged in Mindful Consumption	35	65	39 (F) 31 (M)	.22663*	61 (F) 69 (M)	37 (R) 33 (N)	.28434	63 (R) 67 (N)
% Who had knowingly engaged in Overconsumption	72	28	81 (F) 64 (M)	.04551***	19 (F) 36 (M)	80 (R) 65 (N)	.069**	20 (R) 35 (N)

*=significant at .25 level; **= significant at .10 level; ***=significant at .05 level; ****=significant at .01 level

Implications and Conclusions

It is important for marketers to realize that even informed consumers may not correctly perceive the variety of usage and avoidance behaviors that are encompassed in ethical consumption. This is indicated by the fact that while a larger percentage of students said they were familiar with ethical consumption than with mindful consumption, a larger percentage of students said they were able to define mindful consumption and had actively engaged in mindful consumption than those indicating they could define or had actually engaged in ethical consumption. Furthermore, these results suggest that both ethical and mindful consumption are sufficiently ambiguous terms even among informed individuals that such individuals may not necessarily perceive a strong link between mindful and ethical consumption even though they are related concepts.

In contrast, framing ethical consumption in terms of overconsumption or more tempered usage could be a successful strategy. The results here showed young consumers were convinced they have engaged in overconsumption yet much less confident they practice or have practiced either mindful or ethical consumption. Indeed, the large majority of students, regardless of gender or recent exposure to ethical marketing issues, felt they had a much better understanding of "overconsumption" and had actively engaged in it compared to either ethical or mindful consumption. This implies that a focus on overconsumption could be an effective path for linking consumer ethics, consumption, and sustainability. Given the widespread interest in sustainability, it could potentially be constructive at this point to aggregate many or most of the various "forms" of ethical consumption (green purchases, fair trade purchases, etc.) and collectively rebrand them as "sustainable consumption." Disfavoring the term ethical consumption and moving toward use of the more applied term "sustainable consumption" will focus attention on the singular characteristic of sustainability that underlies all the different forms of ethical consumption while better distinguishing ethical consumption (with its many varied notions) from the broader concept of ethical consumerism. In addition, the term "sustainable consumption" would allow for the consolidation of disparate forms of ethical consumption having different foci (e.g. products that deplete the natural environment versus companies that exploit workers versus products/services that harm people/society). As mentioned previously, sustainable consumption may be broadly defined as consumptive behavior that consciously and deliberately avoids or seeks to minimize concomitant societal and environmental degradation.

This definition of sustainable consumption focuses on positive consumptive behaviors (as opposed to non-consumptive political behaviors such as activism) and is intentionally broad. Although sustainability in the business world has often keyed on environmental concerns, Sheth *et al.* (2011) argue that a more comprehensive, tripartite understanding of sustainability—sustainability that has three dimensions: economic, environmental, and social—is “gaining worldwide currency.” This broadening of sustainability dovetails with the increasingly popular business goal of maximizing the “triple bottom line.” The triple bottom line simultaneously obligates a business to its shareholders, the environment, and society in measuring its success. Researchers have recently recommended that the definition of ethical consumption broaden in concert with the increased dimensionality of sustainability (Pharr 2015).

Understanding the Ethical Consumer

Initial research in the area of ethical consumption was to identify and profile the ethical shopper (Pharr 2011). Early studies in particular sought to determine whether routine demographic data could significantly contribute to a meaningful profile of ethical shoppers. Yet the considerable body of research in this area produced few consistent findings (Bray *et al.* 2011). The occasional study found the only demographic characteristic capable of consistently distinguishing ethical shoppers to be education level (see Doran 2009, for example). As the paradigm of ethical consumption transforms to encompass an "everyday integral ecology" of sustainable consumer behavior, demographics may better align with the more broad-based construct of sustainable consumption. The results of this study imply that certain demographic factors such as gender and education level, particularly as they pertain to conditioned role behaviors and attitude formation, may deserve further scrutiny.

It has been, however, the general inefficacy of demographics to explain patterns of ethical consumption that drove the research to focus instead on a variety of predictors related to situational and attitudinal factors. Bray *et al.* (2011) compiled the following list of situational variables that may act as impeders to ethical consumption: product availability, number and frequency of ethically-informed marketing messages, consumer skepticism of ethically-based companies and brands, consumer inertia (resistance to initial or primary purchases), price, and quality. In a recent literature review, Pharr (2014) reports that price, quality, and reliability have shown up as significant moderators of ethical consumption in the United States. Moreover, in both Europe and the United States, increasingly moderated ethical consumption is accompanied by increased skepticism and cynicism on consumers' behalves. Studies have shown consumers are skeptical not only of the economic impact of ethical goods on the broader economy but of their own ability to "make a difference" through their personal consumption of ethical goods (Witkowski & Reddy 2010; Hamilton 2008). The findings related to consumer skepticism are an important signal that attitudinal differences may be important moderators of ethical consumption. Although differences in the understanding of mindful consumption related to gender and education showed up, whether such differences portend attitudinal differences and if such differences will extend to moderate the practice of mindful consumption is not yet known.

Primary Conclusion

These results support the idea that neither ethical nor mindful consumption designate a clearly defined set of practices. Researchers cannot count on even better-informed consumers to understand the full extent of ethical consumption possibilities or correctly apply more encompassing terms such as mindful consumption or overconsumption. As the construct of ethical consumption broadens to include any and all decisions that seek to minimize or avoid concomitant degradation of the environment, society, or economic systems as a result of humans' consumptive behavior, researchers will need to carefully operationalize the construct. There is much work to be done before consumers fully understand the paradigm of sustainable consumption and before marketers fully understand consumers' behavior with regard to sustainable consumption.

Limitations

These results are based on a small sample of upperclassmen business students and obviously are not representative of consumers in general. An additional problem stems from the terms "ethical consumption" and "mindful consumption" as well as from the term "overconsumption. These terms are value-laden and their meanings are interpreted differently by different people. In this study, the terms were intentionally NOT explicitly defined, in order to ascertain students' unprompted level of familiarity with or recall of the terms. The student perceptions of the terms and self-assessment of their own levels of participation in consumer ethics were of primary interest here. This raises the possibility that students perceived the terms incorrectly, especially the more ambiguous "mindful consumption." Taking a cue from the word "mindful," many may have perceived that mindful consumption implies deliberate, planned, or carefully evaluated purchases as opposed to tempered, sensitive consumer behavior. It is also possible that many students perceived "overconsumption" similar to the way one might define "overeating" or "overindulging," that is simply as consuming far too much of certain products like soft drinks, beer, or video games. While these misperceptions are important to pinpoint in exploratory research, they also allude to the problems that occur when widely-used definitions do not exist or are not consistently used in a field of study such as that of ethical consumption. Lastly, studies of consumer behavior that focus on value-laden topics like these may be prone to respondents misrepresenting their true attitudes and behaviors because they wish to be perceived virtuously by the researchers. This is born out in the significantly larger number of students who said they had engaged in both mindful consumption and overconsumption as opposed to ethical consumption, even though they were less certain of what mindful consumption consists of. Overall it should be remembered, however, that defining concepts, locating problems, and laying the groundwork for future studies are some of the main functions of exploratory research.

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