

# A Research Agenda for Advancing the Marketer's Understanding of Ethical Consumption in a Post-Modern World

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## Introduction

The attribution of moral significance to the choice of everyday consumer goods may well mean that personal consumption is increasingly viewed as an ethical exercise and not simply an economic transaction.

Consumer behavior has emerged as an important moral battleground in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Those in doubt of this statement need look no farther than their local Catholic church. In a church encyclical released 06.18.15, Pope Francis called for radical transformation not only of global politics and economics but of individual lifestyles in the battle to confront the environmental deterioration of Earth. An encyclical is a document that serves as an official communication of church teaching. Francis (the first pope from the Global South) wrote in *Laudato Si* (the first encyclical entirely devoted to environmental issues) that “humanity is called to take note of the need for changes in lifestyle and consumption to address the human causes that produce or aggravate environmental degradation and climate change” (*Laudato Si*, 2015).

That such a high-profile religious communique would focus on human consumption and its consequences brings the marketing domain of consumer behavior squarely into the personal moral realm, as was the Pope's intent some would argue (Stoll 2015). Consumer behavior, however, breached the moral domain two or more decades ago in a subfield of marketing known as ethical consumption (Pharr 2014). To consume ethically is to consume products that negatively affect neither man nor the natural world (Brinkman 2004). It extends to products that, not only through their consumption but also through their production or disposal, have a deleterious effect on people, society, nature, the environment, and/or animals.

Ethical consumption had its genesis in the green movement of the 1990s (Sheth *et al.* 2011) but today extends well beyond green (or greener) consumption. 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, products or 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). In its most recent development, ethical consumption has broadened to encompass the paradigm of “mindful consumption.” Mindful consumption is tempered consumptive behavior that ensues from and is reinforced by a mindset that reflects a caring sensitivity toward self, community, and nature (Sheth *et al.* 2011). Mindful consumption is the antithesis of unfettered or over- consumption.

## **Link between Consumption and Sustainability**

It is the notion of unfettered consumption as mainstream consumer behavior that is highlighted then repudiated in the recent papal encyclical, with statements such as:

- “The warming caused by *huge consumption* on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world,” and
- “People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their *harmful* habits of *consumption* which, rather than decreasing, appear to be *growing all the more*.” [All italics added] (*Laudato Si*, 2015)

In remedy, the encyclical calls for “an integral ecology made up of simple daily gestures which break the logic of exploitation and selfishness” (*Laudato Si*, 2015). With this prescriptive, the Pope appears to call for a kind of robust *sustainability* (although the word sustainability was not itself prominent in the encyclical, appearing only twice in the 192-page document with one of those appearances in the bibliography in a reference citation).

In the business world, sustainability—the ability to continue a defined behavior indefinitely—has been most often operationalized as procurement practices coupled with production methods that guard against environmental destruction as well as 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 societal and environmental degradation may be thought of as sustainable consumption. In concert with a widely-distributed and much-discussed papal encyclical, it may be that the

application of sustainability to human consumptive behavior emerges as the new face of ethical consumption.

## **Purpose of the Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to develop a research agenda that will aid marketers in better understanding the increasingly fluid paradigm of ethical consumption. In order to do so, we examine recent literature concerning ethical consumption and expose gaps in the findings and structural limitations in the research methodologies employed. Throughout the paper an effort will be made to contrast the state of ethical consumption and associated research in the United States with that in Europe where ethical consumerism is significantly more mature and institutionalized (Pharr 2014). The paper highlights several areas of future research that, if pursued, should foster a more comprehensive theory of ethical consumption.

## **Step 1—Refine and Operationalize Ethical Consumption**

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. As mentioned above, 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 also 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).

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 using grass-roots consumer power to effect public policy and economic change (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).

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*. It is recommended 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.”

It might also be constructive at this point to aggregate all the various forms of ethical consumption and collectively rebrand them as “sustainable consumption” in an effort to better distinguish ethical consumptive behavior from the broader concept of ethical consumerism while focusing on a characteristic that underlies all the different forms of ethical consumption—sustainability. The term *sustainable consumption* would allow for the consolidation of disparate forms of ethical consumption having different foci (e.g. depletion of the natural environment versus exploited workers versus harm to people) with the following definition: Sustainable consumption is “consumptive behavior that is capable of being practiced indefinitely as a result of eliminating or minimizing concomitant degradation of the environment, society, or economic systems.”

This definition focuses on positive consumptive behaviors and is intentionally broad. Although sustainability in the business world has often focused on environmental concerns, Sheth *et al.* (2011) argue that a more comprehensive, tripartite perception 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. It is recommended that the definition of ethical consumption broaden in concert with the increased dimensionality of sustainability.

## **Step 2. Supplant Descriptive Studies of Ethical Consumers with Predictive Research on Ethical Consumption**

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 has produced few consistent findings (Bray *et al.* 2011) and centers overwhelmingly on European consumers (Witkowski & Reddy 2010). In one of a handful of studies to focus on American shoppers, neither age, gender, marital status, race, nor education level were able to significantly explain variance in patterns of ethical consumption when measured as the purchase of fair-trade products (Doran 2009). Similarly, in

Europe, routine equivocal findings led researchers to conclude that demographic factors are generally poor predictors of ethical consumption for a variety of background reasons primarily related to situational and attitudinal factors (Bray *et al.* 2011, De Pelsmacker *et al.* 2007).

In practice, trade statistics show the diffusion of ethical consumption is markedly uneven across continents (Pharr 2011). This led cross-cultural researchers to examine nationality in conjunction with a number of exogenous variables such as national cultural identity, media coverage of ethical consumerism, and market structure to explain differences in rates of ethical consumption (Jacobsen *et al.* 2007; Kjaernes *et al.* 2007). Duplicative findings from these studies led to a strong tradition of relying on nationality and national culture to explain differences in rates of ethical shopping as well as the more basic way individuals conceptualize their roles and responsibilities as ethical shoppers (Jacobsen *et al.* 2007). Findings from these studies often led to the conclusion that Americans may be laggards when it comes to ethical shopping compared to consumers in other affluent industrial economies (cf. Witkowski & Reddy 2010, Hartlieb & Jones 2009). However, recent research showing Americans engaging in ethical consumption on par with at least some parts of Europe has begun to dismantle this stereotype and whittle away at the conventional understanding of cross-national differences (Witkowski & Reddy 2010).

Trade data on the number and volume of purchases across a variety of ethical products (organic, green, fair-trade certified, etc.) coupled with empirical studies of U.S. consumers indicates that the U.S. is following an equivalent but significantly accelerated progression as that followed in Europe when it comes to the adoption of ethical consumption (Pharr 2014). Over time as various types of ethically-based products become mainstream and the movement matures, the commitment to ethical shopping appears to diminish in all but the most dedicated ethical shoppers (Doran 2009, Tormey 2007) and there is increasing evidence it is significantly mediated by economic and functional product factors like price, quality, and reliability (cf. Pharr 2014).

The inefficacy of demographics to explain patterns of ethical consumption has driven the research forward. Research into situational factors that may moderate ethical consumption is mounting. Bray *et al.* (2011) provide an excellent review of European studies and contribute the following list of potential 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
- Quality

Pharr (2014) reports that price, quality, and reliability have shown up as significant moderators of ethical consumption in the United States. In both Europe and the United States, the pattern of moderated consumption is accompanied by increased skepticism and cynicism on consumers' behalf concerning the economic impact of ethical goods on the broader economy, their individual personal contributive impact on the world, and the motives of companies that promulgate ethical product or business claims (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. Interestingly, Bray *et al.* (2011) report the following as documented endogenous moderators of ethical consumption among Europeans: (1) moral maturity; (2) beliefs; (3) confidence; and (4) locus of control. Burke *et al.* (2014) found European consumers that are negatively-oriented toward ethical consumption to be controlled by negative beliefs in four areas: indifference, confusion, expense, and skepticism. In contrast, consumers with positive orientations toward ethical shopping were more likely to hold positive beliefs in three areas: personal impact, personal health, and personal relevance. The researchers postulated that locus of control may well be a contributing antecedent factor to these beliefs or attitudes though no empirical tests of this linkage were performed.

U.S.-based research suggests values (Long & Murray 2012, Doran 2009), religiosity (Doran & Natale 2011) political leanings (Pharr 2011), and perceptions of morality (specifically in terms of what it means to act morally) (Haidt and Graham 2007) may all contribute to ethical consumption differences in Americans. Doran (2009) found the most frequent and committed U.S. ethical shoppers were singularly controlled by Universalism values while less loyal ethical shoppers had more broad-based values. The latter group displayed significantly different levels of value in Benevolence<sup>1</sup> and Self-direction than the most loyal ethical shoppers. These findings suggest loyal ethical shoppers have a more holistic worldview than do intermittent ethical shoppers who exhibit greater in-group (e.g. family) loyalty and less universal social concern. When directly comparing U.S. and German shoppers, Witkowski and Reddy (2010) found significant differences in ethical consumption explained by respondent idealism and social engagement behavior irrespective of nationality, further suggesting a combination of endogenous and exogenous variables at play in ethical consumption.

There are also significant environmental and market structure differences between the U.S. and Europe that have been found to contribute to differences in patterns of ethical consumption as well as attitudinal differences between consumers on the two continents (see Pharr 2011). In countries where ethical consumerism is more organized and cohesive, people were more likely to attribute

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<sup>1</sup> Values based on the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS)

moral significance to their everyday purchases and be more committed to ethical shopping (Kjaernes *et al.* 2007). In European countries having a greater number of nongovernmental (NGO) institutions present in the country dedicated to advancing ethical consumption, consumers were found to be significantly more interested in and motivated to buy ethically-based products (Hartlieb & Jones 2009). Empirical data has also correlated individuals' rates of media usage and media exposure with participation in ethical consumerism. Shah *et al.* (2007) found respondents' desire and intent to express political concerns through consumer behavior significantly higher as their rates of both conventional and online news use increased. Altogether these findings imply ethical shopping behavior can be conditioned and is somewhat predicated upon information availability and the salience of the issue within the public realm. The findings further suggest that the larger environmental context of ethical consumption may be important in articulating a holistic model of ethical consumption.

Table 1 summarizes the variables that have been tested for their ability to mediate ethical consumption. The moderators are categorized according to whether they are endogenous or exogenous. It should be noted that many of the listed factors have been derived either from context-specific research or from broad research articles into ethical consumption none of which specifically focused on moderators. It is entirely possible that additional factors mediating ethical consumption remain unidentified.

Table 1. Moderators of Ethical Consumption

<b>VARIABLES</b>		<b>Expected Relationship to Ethical Consumption</b>
<b><i>ENDOGENOUS</i></b>	Demographics	Not Significant
	Values	Significant
	Beliefs	Significant
	Attitudes	Significant
	Religiosity	Unknown
	Political Affiliation	Unknown
	Moral Maturity	Significant
	Locus of Control	Unknown
	Idealism	Significant
	Social Engagement	Significant
	Skepticism	Significant
	Ambivalence	Significant
<b><i>EXOGENOUS</i></b>	Price	Significant
	Quality	Significant
	Availability	Unknown
	Media Coverage	Significant
	MarketSupport	Significant

	Organizations	
	National Culture	Unknown
	Product Origin	Significant
	Marketing Message	Unknown

### **Step 3: Model the Hierarchical Brand Effects of Ethical Consumer Behavior**

The wave of recent research into what can only be considered the antecedents and moderators of ethical consumption implies it is time to begin modelling the hierarchical brand effects of ethical/sustainable consumer behavior. This will help to promote a more holistic understanding and advance a more cohesive theory of ethical consumption.

Studies of ethical consumption are often implicitly or explicitly embedded in models of planned behavior related to reasoned ethical action (Bray *et al.* 2011, Pharr 2011). These models emphasize constructs such as morals, ethics, knowledge and attitudes and seek to relate them to ethical choices. In contrast, there are few if any studies that directly assess the effects of ethical marketing claims on consumer buying constructs such as brand attitudes and purchase intentions. As of now, no ethical consumption studies provide brand metrics that help marketers assess effects on their brands or resultant purchases. Consequently, it is difficult or impossible for marketers to know whether or to what extent the marketing approaches they use ultimately affect consumers' enduring brand attitudes or purchase intentions with regard to ethically-based products.

Academic research can benefit the field of ethical consumerism by helping marketers better appreciate how brand effects operate in the area of ethical consumption. This would require, however, that ethically-based marketing techniques be framed within the context of a larger consumer- (as opposed to purely ethical-) decision paradigm. A logical choice is the brand hierarchy-of-effects paradigm that relies upon Fishbein's model of attitude formation to explain how all persuasive marketing fundamentally works (cf. MacKenzie *et al.* 1986). The model, extensively researched for decades, demonstrates that marketing messages centrally impact brand attitudes and purchase intentions through their effect on brand beliefs and peripherally through their effect on the affective construct of attitude toward the advertisement or marketing message ( $A_{ad}$ ). Brand attitudes, marketing message attitudes, and brand beliefs have been found to have many antecedents and moderators such as the attitude toward advertising in general, consumer involvement, product involvement, and personal values (for a meta-analysis see Brown & Stayman 1992).

While few, if any, studies have examined the relationship between attitude toward the advertising message, brand attitude, and purchase intentions for ethical marketing approaches, recent qualitative research (Bray *et al.* 2011) suggests prior brand attachments and brand loyalty may impact consumers attitudes toward ethical consumption and purchase intentions. In addition, there is a significant number of studies that document rising consumer skepticism and cynicism (negative attitudes) toward ethically-based products, brands, and companies (see previous cites) as impeding to ethical consumption.

The study of ethical consumption as “buying behavior” rather than purely “ethical behavior” promises to be rich and illuminating for marketers. To advance a more holistic model, studies are needed to examine the mediating power of consumer, product, and environmental characteristics on attitudes toward ethical brands, ethical consumption, and actual behavior (or intentions). Research to date suggests ethical consumption may derive from one’s ethics (beliefs, values) but be moderated by an “attitude toward ethical consumption” as well as by brand/company attitudes and attitudes toward the marketing messages used to stimulate ethical consumption. These linkages may turn out to be all the more important considering the “ethical behavior gap” that has been widely demonstrated in the ethical choice literature (Burke *et al.* 2014; Bray *et al.* 2011, Witkowski & Reddy 2010).

The ethical behavior gap describes the “disconnect” that often exists between people’s intentions to behave ethically and their actual behavior. Thus ethical reasoning models do not fully account for the inconsistent relationship that has been empirically demonstrated between one’s moral beliefs and actually purchasing ethically. Perhaps rational consumer preferences and brand-related processes will provide the missing link. In other words, it could be the application of research models concerning conventional brand attitude formation and effects to ethical consumer purchases that provides the missing link to bridge the gap between ambivalent ethical consumption and rational consumer behavior.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

This paper focuses on and is intended to help marketers better understand the increasingly fluid paradigm of ethical consumption. In today’s post-modern world, individual product choices are being increasingly scrutinized for the ethical and moral implications of their purchase, consumption, and disposal—most recently by Pope Francis in his church encyclical that focuses on environmental and social degradation, links it to unfettered and over- human consumption, and calls for more mindful and sustainable consumption on the part of people everywhere around the world, but most especially those in affluent, industrialized nations.

The paper discusses research of ethical consumption and offers a research agenda focused on advancing marketers understanding of ethical consumption. The agenda calls first for refining and better operationalizing the construct of ethical consumption by distinguishing ethical *consumption* from ethical *consumerism* and emphasizing the positive use aspects of ethical consumption rather than negative avoidance behaviors. Next, the agenda identifies numerous antecedents and moderators of ethical consumption and recommends continued research that will focus on supplanting nominal descriptive studies of ethical shoppers with more predictive research of ethical shopping behavior. Last, the agenda demonstrates how the ethical reasoning paradigm can be reconciled with the predominant consumer hierarchy-of-brand-effects decision model to bridge the gap between idealized ethical thinking and rational consumer behavior. The new model allows for better integration of the apparent moral, ethical, social, political, and rational consumer dimensions of ethical consumption choices into a single decision-making framework. The underlying premise of the research agenda is that, in order to achieve a better understanding of ethical consumption, we must endeavor through continuing research to examine it in a more holistic way.

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**Relevance to marketing educators, Researchers, and Practitioners:** This paper will aid marketers in better understanding the increasingly fluid paradigm of ethical consumption and foster a more comprehensive theory of ethical consumption.

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**TRACK: Green Marketing/Sustainability**