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Flexibility, Dissonance and the Conscious Consumer

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although increasing attention has been given to ethical consumption (Devinney, et al 2006; McDonald et al. 2006; Shaw et al. 2005; Szmigin and Carrigan 2005), less is known as to how such decisions are thought through. It is clear that ethical considerations are entering consumer purchase decisions but there is still a 'disconnect between the issues consumers claim to care about' and 'their purchasing behavior' (Belk, Devinney and Eckhardt 2005, 276).

In this study we aim to develop the area of ethical consumption theory through an empirical study with consumers whose purchases do include ethical choices, identified here as conscious consumers. We consider two key areas of theory on which to present this research, dissonance and flexibility, neither of which has been explored in the context of ethical consumption. The paper introduces the concept of the conscious consumer in opposition to previous definitions of ethical consumers and voluntary simplifiers. It then considers the contribution made by existing theories of consumer decision making in helping to understand ethical consumption choices. Empirical research with nine conscious consumers is then explored and the applicability of the theory to their behavior considered. We conclude with a discussion of the issues involved in the better integration and understanding of ethical decision making into peoples' consumption lives.

The conscious consumer is still 'a work in progress' (Siegle 2006, 9). Their decisions centre around whether 'to consume with sensitivity through selecting ethical alternatives' (Szmigin and Carrigan 2005, 609), underpinned by complex attitudes, inclinations and lifestyle goals. Peattie (1999) suggests that the best way to understand ethical consumerism is to view each individual's consumption as a series of transaction decisions that include decisions to engage or not in alternative consumption behavior. While this moves the research into more uncertain and ambiguous territory, emphasizing the plurality and diversity of each consumer creates the potential to take forward the debate on sustainable consumption, and the conflicts and challenges it represents for the majority.

Within the psychology and consumer behavior literature, a lack of a conspicuous definition has resulted in the development of a multi-dimensional construct that encompasses interrelated terms such as trade-off analysis (Johnson 1974), contingent decision behavior (Payne 1982) and 'adaptive decision-making' (Payne, Bettman and Johnson 1993). Interactions with other related theories are also apparent, namely attitude-behavior consistency (Zanna, Olson and Favio 1981), brand-switching and variety-seeking behavior (Bawa 1990). In the absence of a consumer-based definition of the term, flexibility is described here as the inherent ability to change, adapt and/or react to decision-making environments with little forfeiture of time, effort, cost or product performance.

An important aspect of choice is that the consumer may be trading off quality, price and other factors with social or environmental concerns such as under what condition the product was made, or how far it traveled. This in turn may create dissonance. A major contribution to understanding dissonance in the area of ethical consumption comes from the self-consistency interpretation of dissonance (Aronson 1992). Here dissonance occurs when a situation creates inconsistency between the self-concept and behavior. The importance of self-concept is also apparent in self-

affirmation theory which suggests that dissonance is a consequence of behavior which is counter to a person's moral and global integrity (Steele, Spencer and Lynch 1993).

In-depth interviews were conducted with nine consumers who identified themselves as regularly buying ethical products. The themes of flexibility and dissonance were not explicitly presented in the research questions; at the interview stage we were interested in asking about how and why participants shopped the way they did and the feelings they had about their shopping behavior. The verbatim transcripts were interpreted using a translation of text approach (Hirschmann and Holbrook 1992)

The participants in this study reveal a mixture of behaviors and beliefs about their ethical consumption. The awareness and desire to make, in the most part, informed and considered ethical choices lead us to suggest that there are probably a substantial number of people who are what we have termed conscious consumers. While their inconsistencies might be construed as flaws in their self-integrity, in fact, what we have termed their flexibility seems to help them manage the difficulties and problems of accommodating their own and their families' tastes, budgets and ethical concerns. The tendency to rationalize the decisions we make is normal. We experience threats to our self-concepts and feel uncomfortable to the extent that we believe we have made a less than optimal decision (Hosino-Browne et al. 2005). The participants did not need to seek self-affirming resources in response to a threat to their self-image. Indeed most willingly discussed their range of behaviors without recourse to any justification. This may be because the nature of the participants as well educated, resourceful individuals reduced the threat to their self integrity but research also shows that inconsistency between cognitions is not necessarily enough to arouse dissonance especially where such inconsistency does not involve aversive consequences (Steele, Spencer and Lynch 1993). It may also be that the inconsistencies in behavior are not important enough to create dissonance (Festinger 1957) and so there is no motivation to minimize or even rationalize these choices. Studies in cognitive dissonance have tended to be experimental in nature involving hypothetical situations whereas here consumers are recounting their day-to-day activities and reflecting on them. The concept of flexibility offers an explanation to what may appear as inconsistencies between attitudes and behavior but which do not create dissonance problems that threaten the person's self-integrity. While some were prepared to describe themselves as hypocrites, their reluctance to take what was referred to as the moral high ground indicates a recognition of their own limitations but also an acceptance that integrating ethical considerations into their consumption behavior is a complex and flexible project.

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