

Chapter 104

Broadening the Scope of Ethical Consumer Behaviour: A Study on Five Precepts of Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Consumption is an essential everyday process. By very nature, it is a means of expressing our moral identities and an outlet for ethical obligations. In more recent years, ethical aspects of consumption have come under greater scrutiny with the emergence of ethical consumption discourses, and are currently associated with a range of consumer behaviours and responsible business practices. To this end, religion is an undeniably powerful and concurrently the most successful marketing force that can shape the ethical behaviour, yet under-investigated in consumption practices despite Corporate Socially Responsibility provoked ethical behaviour. Ethical consumption practices are regularly characterised as consumption activities that avoid harm to other people, animals or the environment where basic Buddhist teachings become more pertinent and practiced in Buddhist communities. This study conceptualises the importance of religious beliefs in ethical consumer behaviour and through researcher introspection methodology, the study empirically explore whether and how ethical consumerism is reflected through Five Precepts of Buddhism [i.e. (1) abstain from taking life, (2) abstain from stealing, (3) abstain from sexual misconduct, (4) abstain from false speech, and (5) abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind]. The study contributes to the theory and teaching in the marketing discipline by linking how religious beliefs enhance ethical consumerism that remains largely unexplored.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical consumer behaviour is a burgeoning social movement (Carrington, Neville & Whitwell, 2012) and a topic that has received increased attention in

recent decades. Market research data in UK suggest that ethical food and drink market represents 8% of the total food and drink market (Cooperative Bank, 2009) and 89% of UK consumers report they have ethical issues of concern (Lazarini &

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de Mello, 2001). Thus, consumers increasingly express concerns about the ethicality and impact of their consumption choices upon the environment, animals and the society (De Pelsmacker, Driesen & Rayp, 2005; Shaw & Shui, 2002). Based on political, religious, spiritual, environmental or social motives (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2005) consumers are involved in number of ethical decisions including organic production (Clarke et al., 2008; Dombos, 2008; Guthman, 2004; Tullock & Lupton, 2002); environmentally friendly packaging (Shaw, 2007; Bech-Larsen, 1996; Thøgersen & Grunert-Beckmann, 1996) and recycling (Taylor & Todd, 1995; Thøgersen 1994; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003) that are predominantly focused on environmental and social concerns.

These ethical decisions may have been derived by consumers either as a result of consumer responses to various Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives enforced/promoted by organisations, or due to their internal and personal moral values developed through religious or spiritual beliefs. Current literature posit the significance of religion in human behaviour including learning and development (Sherkat, 2010); promoting health and reducing risk behaviours such as smoking and drinking alcohol (Sinha, Cnaan and Gelles, 2007; De Micheli and Formigoni 2002; Wallace and Forman, 1998) and consumption of food, clothing and charity (Nam et al. 2010; Ger, 2005).

Thus, besides CSR oriented or CSR provoked ethical consumer behaviour that are well researched in the consumer research, the impact of one's religious beliefs on ethical decision-making is significantly valid as spiritually oriented consumption behaviour may also encompass consumption choices upon the environment, animals and the society. Thus, investigation of the relationship between one's religious beliefs and ethical decision-making is paramount to advance consumer behaviour theories and addresses continuous research calls on religion and consumption (Izberk-Bilgin, 2012; Beruchashvili & Arnould, 2005; Watts & Loy, 1998).

The study conceptualises the importance of religious motives (or beliefs) in ethical consumer behaviour and empirically explore whether and how religious beliefs influence consumer ethical-decision making by captivating the Five precepts framework in Buddhism. The study contributes towards consumer research by highlighting the importance of religious beliefs in shaping ethical behaviour that have the ability to precede CSR provoked ethical behaviours put forward by organisation in the current marketing environment.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Ethical Consumption and Decision-Making

Consumption is an essential everyday process; 'to live is to consume' (Borgmann, 2000: 418) and today consumers are thought to play an active and skilled role in the consumption process (Barnett et al., 2004). Existing marketing literature has predominantly used the term 'ethical consumer' to describe those who consider the environment, human and/or animal welfare as important, and as a consequence, evaluate their consumption lifestyles to take these issues into consideration (Strong, 1997; Harrison et al., 2005; Barnett et al., 2005).

Social science research on consumption has discovered that ordinary consumption is inundated with moral, rhetoric and ethical concern where much of the moralising is localised around family and friends, but can be seen as part of people's self-image and their integrity (Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005). Papaoikonomou, Ryan and Valverde (2011) conceptualised ethical behaviour in consumers around two main streams of research: consumer ethics and ethical consumer behavior (Chatzidakis & Mitussis, 2007). Consumer ethics focus on how consumers perceive and react to potentially unethical purchase situations or behaviours such as counterfeiting, using an expired

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