Getting it right – Is it Ethical, Environmental, Green or Sustainable Consumption?

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Abstract

As today’s marketers work towards motivating and encouraging ‘ethical’, ‘environmental’, ‘green’, and ‘sustainable’ behaviours there is the need for consensus about the correct term(s) to use. This paper discusses these constructs as they relate to a wide range of behaviours, and shows that there are differences in their meanings. For example, some sustainable consumption behaviours are not ethical behaviours; the terms environmental and green consumption can be used interchangeably; and sustainable consumption in the market place cannot be achieved unless the target market’s ethical concerns are addressed. Marketers need to familiarise themselves with the meaning of these terms before proceeding with research.

Introduction

Debate about the environment, as well as ethical, sustainable and green behaviour has been much discussed since the 1990’s. While some authors such as Byrch et al. (2007) have linked constructs such as environmentalism and sustainability, other authors have used different terms to describe the same construct. For example, the term ‘sustainable consumption’ has been referred to as ‘community sustainability’ by Voronoff (2005); as well as ‘sustainable behaviour’ (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999); and ‘pro environmental behaviours’ (Jackson 2005). As today’s marketers continue to work towards increasing consumption and gaining competitive advantage, particularly with respect to sustainability and the environment, there is the need to conceptualise these consumption behaviours and to develop strategies to influence external regulatory bodies.

Consumerism is being used by some stakeholders as a basis for social change, based on the theory that companies make decisions about their offerings as a result of consumer demand. Recent changes in consumer behaviour, and the advent of constructs such as ‘green marketing’ (Arnould et al. 2004) and ‘sustainable consumption’ (Jackson 2005) have lead to many studies that were designed to understand how to motivate and encourage such consumer and ethical behaviours (Jackson 2005). In addition it has been recognised that there is a need for more research to better understand the environmental impact of goods and services (Schaefer 2005). This has come about as today’s consumers demand environmentally friendly goods and services, and are willing to pay more for products that are ‘emotionally satisfying’ in terms of the perceived quality, performance, brand image, and the stature they provide (Marshman-Goldblatt 2008). This includes ‘green products’, thus providing an incentive for marketers to offer such products (Schaefer 2005).

The likelihood of adopting sustainable behaviour depends on the amount of behaviour modification required (Byrne and Polonsky 2001), which requires an understanding of the attitudes, demographics, values and behaviours of consumers. While a detailed discussion of these issues cannot be accommodated within the restrictions of this paper, the amount of recent research into this area needs to be considered as background. For example, Petts et al. (1998) and Carrigan et al. (2004) suggested that age is an important moderating variable in environmental ethics and behaviour. In addition, values have been shown to be important variables that affect behaviour, people, and events (Collins et al. 2007); as well as the lifestyle
of individuals (Spaargaren 2003). Individual or personal values include knowledge, attitudes and intentions (Ferrell and Gresham 1985), and they can be used to explain attitudes, intentions and activities towards the environment and its protection. Many authors focussed on values such as ‘environmental concern’ (Frame 2004; Routhe et al. 2005) and ‘green’ consumers, who are thought to be motivated by strong environmental values and attitudes (Schaefer 2005). Laroche et al. (2001, p. 508) described ‘green’ consumers in terms of their willingness to pay more for groceries, by segmenting them into three groups: consumers who were willing to pay a higher price for green products; consumers who were not willing to pay a higher price for green products; and undecided consumers. Frame (2004) segmented customers according to how environmentally considerate and how ‘green’ they were. Frame (2004, p. 520) noted that ‘while these may be appropriate lifestyle classifications for consumer product marketing research, it is unclear to what extent they are applicable to complex issues such as sustainable development where deeper reflection and a deeper shift in consumer behaviour are needed’. In a similar way, knowledge is recognised by researchers as a variable that influences all stages of the decision making process (Laroche et al. 2001). There have been varying research findings about how knowledge affects ‘ecologically compatible’ behaviour, ranging from knowledge being a significant predictor of such behaviour, to the reverse. Environmentally concerned citizens are more knowledgeable about possible solutions to environmental problems (Granzin and Olsen 1991), and people who are more knowledgeable about environmental issues are more willing to pay a premium for green products (Laroche et al. 2001, p. 505).

As marketers and policy makers work towards encouraging consumers to adopt ethical, green and sustainable lifestyles, it is clear that specific demographic and values groups with particular behaviours and attitudes are engaging in different ways in their own kind of sustainability. There is the need to target specific groups in the community who are likely to engage in sustainable lifestyles with greater efficacy in order to achieve these objectives (Gilg et al. 2005). This indicates that there is a need for clarification about the correct term(s) used to describe these behaviours, so that researchers are clear about what they are measuring, be it ethical, environmental, sustainable and/or green. Today, such terms are used in many contexts and even interchangeably in the literature when segmenting the market. This paper summarises existing literature associated with these terms, and it concludes with an understanding of the correct term to use, depending on what is being measured.

**Ethical, environmental and green consumption**

Ethical consumers are defined as ‘those consumers who considered environmental issues, animal issues and ethical issues, including oppressive regimes and armaments, when shopping’ (Shaw et al. 2005a, p. 185). Ethical consumption behaviours, also called ethical consumerism, are ‘decision making, purchases, or other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns’ (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, p. 113). Ethical concerns are responsible for the increasing popularity of organic food, and raised consumer concerns about farming practices and the damage to the environment (Shaw and Shiu 2003). A more recent definition describes ethical consumption as the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices because of personal and moral beliefs (Carrigan et al. 2004). The term ‘ethical consumption’ is now widely used and is responsible for the emergence of marketing practices that target these ethical consumers. This includes the market for ethical investment products; the market for organic produce (Shaw et al. 2005b, p. 186); the emergence of the market for ‘fair trade’ products and media interest in fair trade issues; and, increasing corporate responsibility and supplier power (Carrigan et al. 2004;
Ethical consumerism can be used as a source of competitive advantage for ‘socially and ethically aware organizations’, like ‘green consumerism’ (Strong 1996, p. 11). According to Tallontire et al. (2000) there are three types of ethical consumerism - positive ethical purchase behaviour, negative ethical purchase behaviour, and consumer action or lobbying. Positive ethical purchase behaviour is associated with buying goods with ethical characteristics; negative ethical purchase behaviour is associated with boycotts, avoiding goods with unethical characteristics; and consumer action is associated with activities such as lobbying and direct action about an issue (Tallontire et al. 2000). While consumers who adopt ethical behaviours can be considered to be ethical consumers, it is important to understand that the reverse does not necessarily apply. For example, Carrigan and Szmigin (2004) discussed that a person or business who does not purchase a ‘fair trade’ product is not necessarily considered to be ‘unethical’.

Ethical consumers are influenced by environmental or ethical considerations when choosing products and services (Strong 1996). Environmental ethics occurs when natural resources are treated not just as commodities but as segments of the whole ecology (Shaw et al. 2005b). The outcome of environmental ethics results in consumption having a minimal environmental impact based on a reduced consumption of materials and natural resources, and it has lead to social marketing campaigns to reduce energy and water consumption, among others. The awareness of environmental ethics can lead to environmental consumerism, which is also referred to in the literature as ‘environmentally responsible consumption’ and ‘green consumption’. Such behaviours ‘can be any consumption activities undertaken with the specific aim to reduce negative impacts on the environment’ (Schaefer 2005, p. 90). The term ‘green consumption’ has been defined as the process of avoiding certain types of products, such as those causing pollution or cruelty to animals (Schaefer 2005). It can also represent positive product choices, such as the purchase of environmentally friendly products or recycling behaviour (Carrigan et al. 2004). While ethical concerns are often ongoing and irresolvable, ‘green’ consumption can be managed in a social level (Seyfang 2006). This has lead to the development of models of consumer decision making which consider a societal-centred viewpoint of consumption. Arnould et al. (2004, p. 827) defined green segments as those ‘whose acquisition behaviour is affected by pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours’. They also noted that a green orientation can vary according to the situation as in some instances green consumers may behave in a sustainable manner, whilst in others they show little concern for the environment.

What is common to this discussion is that whether or not a consumer is ‘ethical’ or ‘green’, there is a need to consider their total purchases and behaviours rather than focusing on what they do not do. In fact, consumers have a choice about their behaviour, and many practice ‘consumption as voting’ (Shaw et al. 2006). This means that, as consumers we are creating societies according to what we purchase/use (or don’t purchase/use) and the consumption behaviour that we adopt. Also referred to as ‘individuation’ (Shaw et al. 2006), this describes the personal action that people take when they decide to consume or not to consume indicating that the motivation to act can be very much one of an ‘individual duty’. For example, ‘on one level, I am an “unethical” consumer since I do not concern myself with issues of animal cruelty or sweat shop labour when making purchases, but I am also “ethical” since I buy “fair trade” coffee and recycled paper products’ (Carrigan et al. 2004, p. 416). It is important to consider that when consumers have the time to consider the information available to them, they make a judgment that may or may not result in a decision to buy or use an ethical product, and in this respect they are behaving responsibly and ethically (Carrigan et
Such environmentally responsible consumption may not amount to wholly sustainable consumption but it may be a step in that direction (Schaefer 2005).

**Sustainable consumption**

One of the most often quoted definitions of sustainability comes from the Brundtland Commission (1987), which stresses the necessity of sustainable behaviours to meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. This leaves open several questions, including how ‘needs’ are defined, whose needs take precedence in cases of conflict, and whether any genuine sacrifices in terms of lifestyle are required (Schaefer 2005, p. 77). More broadly, sustainability can also be seen in terms of ‘balancing economic, ecological, and social goals and consequences’ (Schaefer 2005, p. 77). For the purposes of this paper, sustainability will be defined in terms of its impact on the environment and the systems in place in society, which aims to ensure that the community’s actions do not threaten the long-term viability of the planet. Getting consumers to behave in a sustainable way or to adopt a sustainable lifestyle is a gradual process that is part of a holistic move towards a new lifestyle (Gilg et al. 2005). The process of adopting sustainable behaviour has been often discussed in the literature, and consequently there are many terms used to describe ‘sustainable consumption’, a term used by Jackson (2005) and Spaargaren (2003). As mentioned previously, sustainable consumption refers to practices that include ‘community sustainability’ (Voronoff 2005); as well as ‘sustainable behaviour’ (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999); and ‘pro environmental behaviours’ (Jackson 2005). Such behaviours can be applied to short term solutions such as recycling or buying organic foods as well as to long term solutions such as building new dams (Routhe et al. 2005) and the installation of solar panels and reducing green house emissions (Jackson 2005). Even today, sustainable consumption is probably rare for affluent consumers and restricted to a small number of highly committed environmentalists (Schaefer 2005).

While sustainable consumption can be viewed as a form of ‘ethical consumption’, it is different to ethical consumption, as it relates to a wide range of behaviours, some of which are not necessarily linked to ethical consumption. For example, boycotting a brand because they use cheap labour is an ethical choice, rather than a sustainable choice. Therefore, sustainable consumption is considered to be one of the possible outcomes of an ethical decision, but it does not necessarily lead to ethical consumption. Ultimately, such behaviours represent an individual choice that is contingent upon living in the world today (Beck 1992). Ethical consumption behaviour can be seen to be a ‘selfless and active practice’ (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993) that is conducted within the constraints imposed by a situation that can have ethical consequences, such as a drought, global warming, waste reduction, pollution, as well as by a structural power, whereas the consequences of not adopting sustainable consumption behaviours are not necessarily so dire.

As marketers strive to motivate sustainable consumption, they are challenged by the fact that in many instances, people find themselves locked into consumption patterns that may be unsustainable. In society today, ‘consumption is increasingly considered to be a private affair’ (Van Vliet and Stein 2004, p. 354) and difficult to change due to the ‘network’ bound systems to which modern households and businesses are connected, such as to the water and energy supply. Sustainable development policies tend to rely on humans making substantial changes to present (unsustainable) behaviour (Zabel 2005). Being restricted by the systems that are currently in place means that any impediments will need to be substantially reduced or fully removed before consumers even contemplate the uptake of a changed or new behaviour, no
matter how willing or desirable the behaviour change (Byrne and Polonsky 2001; Schaefer 2005). Consumer demand responds closely to structural principles whereby the consumer conforms to normative and prescribed practices of ethical consumption (Van Dam and Stallaert 1978). Such an approach suggests that ethical consumption behaviour is directed and controlled by systems and structures of production and competition (Cherrier 2005), and the recognition that some behaviour changes require that consumers learn new behaviours, such as manually switching between renewable and non-renewable supplies at different times of the day (Arkesteijn and Oerlemans 2005).

The following figure links the main constructs described in this paper. It shows that ethical concerns are important in order to achieve environmental, sustainable or ethical consumption. It also shows that not all ethical consumption behaviours are sustainable, hence its position at the end of the figure.

Fig 1: A model of Ethical concerns, with Environmental, Green, Sustainable and Ethical Consumption

Ethical concerns

- Environmental consumption/consumerism
  - Green consumption and environmental ethics
- Sustainable consumption
  - Community and pro environmental
- Ethical consumption /consumerism
  - Positive, negative, action/ lobbying

Conclusions

There has been much discussion in the literature about environmental, sustainable and ethical consumption. Raising consumers’ awareness of ethical concerns is needed to achieve a degree of concern for the environment as well as sustainable and ethical consumption in the community. Environmental ethics occurs when natural resources are treated not just as commodities but as segments of the whole ecology (Shaw et al. 2005b), and an awareness of environmental ethics can lead to environmental consumerism. This is also referred to as ‘environmentally responsible consumption’ and ‘green consumption’. Sustainability was defined in terms of its impact on the environment and the systems in place in society that aim to ensure that the community’s actions do not threaten the planet’s long-term viability. Getting consumers to adopt a sustainable lifestyle is a gradual process that is part of a holistic move towards a new lifestyle (Gilg et al. 2005). Before consumers consider the changed or new behaviour, this may require the reduction or removal of some of the physical systems that are currently in place (Byrne and Polonsky 2001; Schaefer 2005). Ethical consumption behaviours refer to ‘decision making, purchases, or other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns’ (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, p. 113). These are characterised by three kinds of actions – positive behaviour, negative behaviour and consumer action. Marketers need to familiarise themselves with these terms before proceeding with research, and marketers also need to understand that targeting environmental, sustainable and/or ethical consumption in the market place cannot be achieved unless the target market’s ethical concerns are addressed.
References


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