

Lone no more: The Sociable Ethical Consumer

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Abstract

Since the late 1990s numerous ethical consumption studies have been produced in the field of management; for example, studies to profile the socio-demographic characteristics of the 'ethical' consumer (e.g. Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003), or studies that investigate the attitudinal and psychological variables of consumers' ethical decision-making (Bray *et al.*, 2010). Despite this, the ethical consumer remains an elusive character, with profiles that prove inconclusive or studies that are unable to bridge the 'attitude-behaviour' gap (e.g. Carrington *et al.*, 2010). This paper contends that these results are perhaps an inevitable outcome of how ethical consumption is conventionally conceptualized as an individual who consciously makes decision choices to signify personal beliefs towards the society (Crane and Matten, 2004).

This disproportionate emphasis on the individual decision maker is increasingly challenged by an emerging stream of - mainly interpretivist - studies that call for a more nuanced understanding of how ethical consumer discourses, micro-cultures, and identities are constructed in the marketplace and beyond (e.g. Caruana and Crane, 2008; Moraes *et al.*, 2010). In particular, the acknowledgment of identity formation is of importance (Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2012). Indeed Barnett *et al.* (2005) locates ethical identity as a socio-cultural expression to highlight the limitations of equating ethical identity with the simple choice to buy ethical products. Ethical consumers are increasingly being seen to present their identity through an assemblage of material resources in day-to-day consumption practices, and it is in this vein that consumption is a meaningful form of civic engagement, and a site of political action (Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Moreover, the social tie made by participating in voluntary associations is a potential source of motivation to take action (Barnett *et al.*, 2005; Neilson and Paxton, 2010).

This study draws from the concept of style (Brake, 1985) to demonstrate how it is useful to understand ethical identity as a socio-cultural expression and in particular, how consumption goods establish and maintain identity, the political voice and group membership (Hebdige, 1979; Kidder, 2005). An analysis of style attends to not only a description of the symbolic materials which are associated with display but also the ways in which they are used, i.e. the performances of the users (see Entwistle, 2000; Elliott and Davies, 2006). Style has been only narrowly applied to fashion and has never been applied to understand ethical consumption. This research seeks to re-examine the complex dynamics of ethical consumption through a

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close examination of members of a self-defined ethically conscious consumer group, BORA, in South Korea.

Embracing an ethnographic approach, this research involved six months of participant observation and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews between December 2011 and June 2012. South Korea is an under-researched context for ethical consumption despite enjoying a steep and steady growth in ethical consumption (Won Jae, 2012), and it is also the home country of the lead researcher. Offering a method-in-practice contribution, this study reports on the influence linguistic and cultural characteristics play on the way qualitative research is conducted in the Korean context. A large and rich data set has been collated which includes field notes, interview transcripts, photographs, videos and digitally produced postings. Thematic analysis was employed and the paper reports on on-going analysis from this data.

The analysis demonstrates how ethically conscious consumers have nuanced understandings of ethical consumption shared by the group (Neilson and Paxton, 2010). Members learn from and teach each other about ethical consumption and this process produces webs of meanings and connections between people (Berger and Ward, 2010), thereby bringing a sense of community and identity, which in turn paves the way for individual and collective action embedded in a group context. Ethical consumption emerges as a form of consumer resistance against the mainstream marketplace (Penaloza and Price, 1993) but one that does not bear the usual hallmarks of revolutionary potential. Instead, we argue, ethical consumption is seen as the micro-practices of the everyday as recently noted by Ulver-Sneistrup *et al.* (2011).

Through problematizing conventional views of the ethical consumer this study re-conceptualizes ethical consumption. It demonstrates how style, with its attention to habitus and expertise in language, bodily performance and argot is useful to understand ethical consumption. It moves away from presenting the ethical consumer as a lone consumer burdened with a decision making process to view the ethical consumer and ethical consumption within an organized context. In doing so, it builds upon Ulver-Sneistrup *et al.*'s (2011) recent insights into subtle activism adding further insights into how this is sustained.

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