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Thesis Prospectus

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Do Cultural Values Motivate Ethical Consumerism?

Introduction

There's an old saying that Cinderella is proof that a pair of shoes can change a girl's life. To a certain extent, I can relate. A pair of shoes may not have changed my life and lead me to my prince charming, but they certainly taught me something about the world around me. A few years ago, I purchased a pair of shoes, not realizing at the time how much of an impact it would have on me. This pair of sandals that I bought from a socially conscious business made me realize that my purchases have a direct effect on others. It may seem naïve to say that buying things – consumerism – is an inherently selfish activity, so people typically do not think about others when they purchase a new pair of jeans, a purse, or shoes. But then Nisolo Shoes taught me that through my purchases, not only did I impact others, but I could positively impact others through consuming responsibly. Nisolo's mission statement explains the impact that consumerism can have on the world: "As consumers, we are not alone in the world. We recognize that our small choices have a big impact somewhere else. As producers, we are not alone. We have access to the global market and fair compensation for our work. We are a team of makers, doers, and storytellers working together to facilitate a healthy connection between consumers and producers in the global marketplace." (Nisolo Shoes) This mission statement emphasizes the impact that consumers can have through their purchases, which is essentially what ethical consumerism is – moving past products and focusing on relationships.

I became interested in ethical consumerism, and in this project I aim to learn more about the topic. I will focus on three main questions: what is ethical consumerism? Where does ethical consumerism come from? What influences ethical consumption, and how does culture play into this?

This idea of consuming responsibly is not a new one. In fact, scholars have an intellectual term for it: ethical consumerism. Several scholars have offered their own definitions of this concept. James Carrier is an anthropologist at Oxford Brooks University and the University of Indiana, and has written many articles and journals on ethical consumerism. Two of his works, "Ethical consumption" and "Protecting the Environment the Natural Way: Ethical Consumption and Commodity Fetishism" offer explanations of what ethical consumerism is, and examine how consumers can affect the world around them through their purchases. He defines ethical consumption as the "consumption of goods that are produced in circumstances that meet the purchaser's ethical criteria" (1). Ethical consumption is associated with social and political orientations, and serves as a way to reestablish the link between consumers and producers. According to Carrier, ethical consumers can do two things: lead a more moral life, and affect the world around them through creating competition in the marketplace, which changes the way corporations operate ("Protecting the Environment" 672). Summarily, Carrier argues that ethical consumerism is a social movement that has increasingly grown in popularity in recent years and that emphasizes relationships over products. To me, this means that Carrier's concept of ethical consumerism focuses not on the product, but on the circumstances in which the product was made. It looks past the importance of material items to emphasize the importance of where they come from.

In his works, Carrier provides some background information on ethical consumerism. Carrier argues, "It [ethical consumerism] is the current manifestation of a long history of social movements that have urged people to assess the objects that they confront not just in the classic economic terms of their cost and utility, but also in terms of the ways in which they are produced, processed and transported." (Carrier) He argues that ethical consumerism cannot exist without modernity. "Ethical consumerism cannot be understood without seeing it as an embrace of a certain kind of modernity." (1) Because post materialism is the most current period in history, this idea of modernity, ethical consumerism, and post materialism are all interconnected.

Carrier's works are important to my study because they provide detailed definitions of ethical consumerism and a history of ethical consumerism. In order to determine how cultural values can motivate ethical consumerism, it is important to have an exact definition of the topic, and know where it comes from.

Another scholar, Martin Turcotte, has extensively studied and researched ethical consumerism. Turcotte argues that ethical consumption serves to "to provoke social change." (20) It is a form of political participation, since its goal is to implement change. He goes on to define ethical consumerism as "a production and marketing process considered to be more fair to workers and less harmful to the environment" (20). For Turcotte, ethical consumerism is a two-fold idea: it involves either choosing to buy a product, or choosing *not* to buy a product, both for ethical reasons.

In his study, Turcotte argues that post materialist values are positively associated with ethical consumerism, which coincides with Carrier's findings (22). He presents an example of the first form of ethical consumerism. From the mid-1970s to the early 2000s, the first type of ethical consumerism surfaced: boycotting (20). This idea developed in generations born after the Second World War, when post materialism first emerged.

Two scholars from the University of Texas at Austin, Sergio Cabrera and Christine Williams, conducted a study entitled "Consuming for the Social Good: Marketing, Consumer Citizenship, and the Possibilities of Ethical Consumption." Their study examined modern marketing textbooks, in order to prove whether there exists the idea that consumers can improve the social welfare through consumption. Cabrera and Williams state that historically, scholars argued that consumers do not make good citizens. They argue this because consumerism is an inherently selfish act, and serves only to better oneself, and 'citizenship' is selfless, and serves to promote the good of all of society. In the past, consumerism and citizenship have not been related. But Cabrera and Williams argue that recently, consumerism can be linked to social good. They develop their argument by providing a brief history of ethical consumerism. The first time that consumerism was linked to social good was post-war, when consumers were the ideal citizens (350). Through consumption, Americans could promote freedom, equality, and democracy, because they were fulfilling their duty as citizens (350). Citizens were able to keep the economy afloat through consumerism. This history brings about the idea of consumer citizenship, that Cabrera and Williams develop more in depth throughout their study.

This article largely focuses on relationship management marketing, and in turn, cause marketing, and how these types of marketing are related to ethical consumerism.

The authors specifically focus on neoliberal consumer citizenship, which displays the ideal relationship between consumers, government, and businesses (360). According to Cabrera and Williams, the role of the government is to ensure free competition, and provide a minimum level of protection for consumers. It should only intervene when businesses 'misbehave,' but ideally, businesses should be free from government intervention. The role of business, on the other hand, is to cater to their customers' needs – but not all customers are equal in the eyes of the business. Businesses should cater to the most profitable customers' needs. Finally, the customer's responsibility is to have desires, wants, and needs, and have them fulfilled by the business (360).

One important part of Cabrera and Williams' research includes a list of different demographics and values that affect consumer behavior. The authors argue that consumer actions are influenced by culture, subculture, values, beliefs, attitudes, lifestyle, personality, life-cycle stage, age, gender, family, social groups, reference groups, class, status, and other psychological factors (363). From these things, businesses can easily predict consumer actions. Additionally, consumers display a motivation to buy (or not buy) goods – and this is related to a hierarchy of needs (physiological, safety, social, esteem, self-actualization). Consumers satisfy their bottom needs, and motivation to buy the higher needs increases (363).

The study focuses largely on marketing, which applies to the conclusion of my study – why this cross-cultural study of ethical consumption is important in the first place. At the

conclusion of my research, I hope to prove why a cross-cultural study of ethical consumerism is important in order to identify the ethical consumer to expand the marketplace for ethical consumerism. Businesses need to know who the ethical consumer is, so that they can properly market to them. Through my research, I will identify the ethical consumer and what motivates ethical consumerism, so that businesses are able to efficiently market to the correct consumers.

Sooyoung Cho and Andreas Krasser are two scholars that conducted a study entitled “What Makes Us Care? The Impact of Cultural Values, Individual Factors, and Attention to Media Content on Motivation for Ethical Consumerism.” Cho is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Communication at Kyung Hee University in Seoul, South Korea, and Krasser graduated from Kyung Hee University with an MA in Journalism and Communication. Krasser is now an account planner at DDB Korea. Their study examines the impact of cultural values on ethical consumerism, and offers a different definition of ethical consumerism. They argue that it is “an expression of ethical concerns about products and organizations ‘by choosing to purchase a product that meets certain ethical standards, or by choosing not to purchase a product that fails to meet that criteria.’” (3) These concern environmental considerations, animal welfare, fair trade, labor standards, and organic food sales. Krasser and Cho present a two-fold concept of ethical consumerism: buying *and* boycotting.

Cho and Krasser present a brief history of ethical consumerism, through the topic of post-materialism. There is a history behind ethical consumerism that fits into a larger framework. This history includes a recent movement called “post materialism.” In recent years,

a new age has emerged that scholars are calling “post materialism.” Post materialism, in general terms, is the period in history that followed materialism. According to Cho and Krasser, materialism refers to the “value placed on the acquisition of material objects,” while post-materialism “represents values that emphasize environmental protection, sense of community, tolerance and inclusion of minorities, concern over quality of life, self-actualization, human rights, sustainable development, and demands for choice among products and services.” (7)

Materialism means that success can be determined by the amount of “things” that one person has. Post materialism follows this period, and moves past the importance of material items. Post materialism focuses more on where items come from, how they are made, who makes them, and more. As a result of this period in history, a new movement has emerged: ethical consumerism.

Their research is extremely applicable to my study, because they completed their research through a cross-cultural study aimed at providing an understanding of motivation for ethical consumerism. Cho and Krasser surveyed respondents from Austria and South Korea. The authors found that there were large cultural differences between the two cultures they studied, and in turn, a large difference in the amount of ethical consumerism. They found that culture was a strong predictor for ethical consumerism, because it reflects the values that consumers learn from society. They argue that cultural differences shape consumer attitudes and behavior.

Cho and Krasser developed a series of hypotheses that they sought to prove throughout their research. The hypotheses are as follows: Post-materialism will be positively related to motivation for ethical consumerism; materialism will be negatively related to motivation for

ethical consumerism (7); consumers from non-materialistic cultures are more likely to show higher motivation for ethical consumerism than those from materialistic cultures (8); universal benefits will be positively related to motivation for ethical consumerism; emotional benefits will be positively related to motivation for ethical consumerism (9); ethical self-identity will be positively related to motivation for ethical consumerism (9); attention to news media content will be positively related to motivation for ethical consumerism; attention to entertainment media content will be negatively related to motivation for ethical consumerism (10).

Summarily, Cho and Krasser developed a research question to involve these values: To what degree do the seven variables (post-materialism, materialism, emotional benefits, universal benefits, self-identity, news media attention, and entertainment media attention) predict motivation for ethical consumerism (10)?

My study will be very similar to Cho and Krasser's –to find out what aspects of culture motivate ethical consumerism. However, I will be using two different areas and comparing their cultures, Argentina compared to the southern United States.

Another study relevant to my project is Marsha Dickson's study entitled "Utility of No Sweat Labels for Apparel Consumers: Profiling Label Users and Predicting Their Purchases." Dickson was an associate professor in the Department of Apparel, Textiles, and Interior Design at Kansas State University, Manhattan. Dickson's study analyzed consumer behavior, researching whether or not a "no sweat" label would influence an ethical consumer's behavior. The main goal of Dickson's study was to identify the market for no-sweat label users, and profile the attitude and demographic characteristics of this market (101).

Dickson's study provides a brief history on one dimension of ethical consumerism that deals with sweatshops. Dickson argues, "Since the mid-1990s, government officials, consumer activists, labor representatives, industry leaders, and the media have focused increasing attention on working conditions surrounding the production of apparel." (96) Since these arguments have arisen, ethical consumers are demanding that governments place greater regulations on working conditions. Dickson's goal is to analyze the use of social labeling campaigns and how consumers react to them. She states that "The objectives of social labels are to provide information to consumers so that they can knowledgeably support ethical businesses and refrain from unknowingly supporting unethical businesses." (qtd. in Wang, Fletcher, and Carly) In this case, knowledge is power: knowing how and in what circumstances a product was made can potentially influence consumer behavior. Dickson is looking for characteristics of consumers that may choose the no-sweat label when shopping (100). She argues that psychographic and demographic characteristics do in fact influence socially conscious consumer behavior: age, education, gender, income, marital status all influence ethical consumerism (100).

Dickson developed seven hypotheses that she sought to prove throughout her study. The hypotheses are as follows: 1. "The utility of the No Sweat label relative to the utilities of other product characteristics differs for Label Users and Nonusers." 2. "Users of the No Sweat label hold more supportive attitudes toward socially responsible businesses than do Nonusers." 3. "Users of the No Sweat label have greater concern for sweatshop issues than do Nonusers." 4. "Users of the No Sweat label have more negative beliefs about conditions in (a) foreign and (b) U.S. apparel factories than do Nonusers." 5. "Users of the No Sweat label are more

knowledgeable about sweatshop issues than are Nonusers.” 6. “Users of the No Sweat label are more likely to be (a) female and (b) married than are Nonusers.” 7. “Users of the No Sweat label are significantly different in (a) age, (b) income, (c) educational attainment, and (d) employment status than Nonusers.” (101) In order to prove or disprove these hypotheses, Dickson surveyed representatives in the United States with an eight-page questionnaire with three sections (102). In section one, respondents were asked the likelihood of buying a man’s dress shirt, with five characteristics including quality, fashion colors, fabric, price, and the presence of a No Sweat label (102). Section two of the questionnaire measured respondent’s beliefs about working conditions in foreign countries and the United States (103).

In conclusion, Dickson found that only a small portion (16%) of respondents were strongly influenced by the presence of a No Sweat label (115). She also determined that unmarried females with lower education levels are more likely to purchase apparel with No Sweat labels (114). This study is relevant to my research because it examines one product and how demographics and values play into consumer behavior, determining whether or not consumers will ethically consume.

Three points can summarize the findings in my literature review. First, I developed a general definition for ethical consumerism. Second, my literature provided a historical framework for ethical consumerism. Finally, I have realized that two of the most important factors that motivate ethical consumerism are demographics and cultural values. Each culture has its own distinct set of ideas, values, morals, and standards, and all of these cultural

differences motivate consumers to consume ethically. Different cultures will consume differently.

One of the studies included in my literature review used surveys to determine how cultural values play into different facets of ethical consumerism, No Sweat labels. This represents one dimension of ethical consumerism and how it is affected across different cultures. Dickson's study, "Utility of No Sweat Labels for Apparel Consumers: Profiling Label Users and Predicting Their Purchases," surveys US consumers to examine their willingness to buy No Sweat garments. This study focuses on the relationship between knowledge, concern for workers, and support for socially responsible businesses and ethical consumerism.

In conclusion, I ask, why is this important in the first place? Why is it necessary to know how cultural values influence ethical consumerism? The reason I chose to write on this topic is because I have realized the importance of knowing that our purchases affect more than just ourselves. A purchase made here can affect someone in an entirely different country, entirely different culture, and entirely different circumstance. On one hand, it is important for marketing purposes. "International companies need to understand how ideas, values, and moral standards differ across cultures and how cultural differences affect consumers in order to develop successful marketing strategies." (Swaidan) "In summary, a greater understanding of how culture influences consumer ethics will allow marketers to develop better strategies that include consumers' ethical characteristics." (Swaidan 2011). On the other hand, it is important because of globalization. "With the rise of globalization, it is essential to understand, not just from a theoretical perspective, but also from a marketer's vantage point, how ethical

interpretations and actions might differ in various consumer markets around the world.”

(Krasser and Cho). Lastly, it is important to know exactly who the ethical consumer is. Through my study I will be examining different cultures and different consumer behavior, so I will gather a good idea of what an ethical consumer looks like. Essentially, at the end of my research, I will be finding and identifying the ethical consumer, so that I can expand the marketplace for ethical consumerism.

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