Self-Conscious Emotions & Ethical Consumption: 
A Framework for Application

Introduction

Recent research suggests that emotions can have a central role in decision making in a number of contexts. These contexts range from work tasks and moral behaviour (e.g. Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton, 1994), social judgements and social behaviour (e.g. Forgas, 2000) to consumption (e.g. Lerner, Small, & Lowenstein, 2004). The context of ethical consumption – defined as consumption that entails concerns the area of human welfare, animal welfare and/or environmental welfare (Low & Davenport, 2007) – is one in which the consideration of emotions is particularly pertinent and also neglected. Present models of consumers’ ethical decision making have not adequately considered the role of emotions; they have portrayed moral and ethical decisions as essentially cognitive episodes.

This paper represents an attempt to set the agenda for the future investigation of emotions in consumer ethics. A core aim of this paper is to highlight the need for further investigation of a particular category of emotions known as self-conscious emotions (SCEs) in the field of ethical consumption and consumption more generally. After all, many consumer decisions have an ethical dimension and many decisions more have an emotional dimension (e.g. Lau-Gesk & Drolet, 2005; O’Guinn & Faber, 1989; Woodruffe, 1997).

The paper starts with an insight into the main characteristics of SCEs followed by a review of the research into emotions and consumer decision making. This is followed by a discussion of extant models of ethical decision making. Next a framework for applications is proposed. The paper concludes with a section on proposed methodology and future research.

Self-conscious emotions

The category of SCEs includes both negative emotions (shame, guilt, embarrassment) and positive (pride, elevation, content) emotions (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007), which have different roles and functions as explained below. Among the above emotions, guilt, shame and pride can be considered the most relevant to the context of ethical consumption. Consistent with existing research, guilt and shame are two powerful moral emotions that arise in many situations which entail an ethical dilemma. Alternatively, pride (i.e. achievement-oriented pride) represents the opposite reaction to shame and guilt, and can act as a motivator of repeat ethical choices.

SCEs represent emotions ‘that are linked to the interest or welfare of either of the society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent’ (Haidt, 2003, p. 276). For some contemporary psychologists (e.g. Tracy & Robins, 2004) these emotions set themselves apart through the processes of self-evaluation and self-reflection that they entail. Baldwin and Baccus (2004) state that the mandatory cause of self-conscious emotions is others’ appraisal, and this evaluation can be factual or it can happen in the individual’s mind (see also Leary, 2007). In both cases, the object of the reflection is the same – the ‘self’ – whether the evaluation agent is the individual or others. The ‘self’ is compared with one’s or others’ image and also suffers the consequences or benefits of particular self-conscious emotions (e.g. guilt could provide the feeling of punishment; pride could provide the reinforcement of reiterating a similar behaviour). SCEs play numerous roles in an individual’s life. They assist in the coordination of general behaviour, of other emotions and even thoughts (Campos,
1995; Fisher & Tangney, 1995). SCEs can also motivate people in work related tasks and in driving a socially accepted or moral behaviour (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). They rely on cognitive processes to manifest themselves and the link between SCEs and cognition led some to label basic emotions as ‘cognitive-independent’, and SCEs such as pride, guilt and shame as ‘cognitive-dependent’ (Izard, Ackerman, & Schultz, 1999, p. 92).

The importance of understanding and using SCEs in the context of consumer behaviour lies in the fact that they relate to threats to ‘social self’. This aspect of the self is manifested in various consumption situations including ethical consumption. The risks for the social self are important for any individual as they can generate reduction in social esteem or social status or engender social dismissal. Dickerson and Kemeny (2004) refer to these threats as ‘social-evaluative threats’.

**Emotions and consumer decision making**

In the past two decades, many studies have tried to uncover the mechanisms that link affect and cognition; explicitly focusing on judgements as cognitive processes rather than emotional ones – which lead to the generation of a series of theories (e.g. Bower, 1983; Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Isen, 1987; Schwarz & Bless, 1991; Sinclair & Mark, 1992). The traditional approach dissociated affect and judgements, and regarded the latter as mainly cognitive. Alternatively, the contemporary approach links these two elements based on the informational role of affect (Schwarz & Clore, 1988) and the affect-priming model (Bower, 1991; Forgas, 1991). The association between emotions and moral judgements is demonstrated by the fact that some emotions have moral appraisal functions (i.e. they are connected to moral concerns). For example, anger is connected with rights, freedom; compassion is connected with harm, need; guilt is connected with own transgression (Keltner, Horberg, & Oveis, 2006). Moreover, Greene et al. (2004) discovered that, from a neurological stand, emotions and reason compete when moral dilemmas/decision are considered, supporting the idea that – although emotions and cognitions co-exist – one can take precedent over the other. Furthermore, Green and Haidt (2002) consider that all emotions take part in moral judgements but some are more morally embedded into people’s lives and actually drive their decisions (e.g. shame, guilt, embarrassment and anger). These findings, and theories in the area of moral judgement, emphasise the necessity of investigating moral/self-conscious emotions in ethical consumption.

In addition to general social judgements, the link between affect and judgement has been investigated in the context of consumption (e.g. Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007; Yates, 2007). The Appraisal-Tendency Framework (Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007), applied to particular situations and emotions such as fear and anger, has facilitated a better understanding of the relationship between affect and cognition.

Overall, while generic emotions (e.g. anger, regret, happiness, sadness) have been considered in economic theory and consumer behaviour, research about SCEs is much more limited. An attempt to illustrate the influence of emotions in consumption was undertaken by Elliott (1998). In his generic model of emotion driven choice post-hoc rationality plays a role in dissipating negative emotions such as guilt, anxiety and regret.
Models of ethical decision making

A review of ethical consumer behaviour literature identified several significant models. Some of these models focused on the societal level of ethical consumption and other models on the individual level, involving both ethical issues in business (e.g. Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986, 1993; Trevino, 1986) and ethical issues of consumers (e.g. Marks & Mayo, 1991; Shaw & Shiu, 2002). Despite this dichotomy between the individual and the societal, the models and the corresponding streams of research are not mutually exclusive. This is because the consumer has a dual representation – ‘customer as a citizen’ and ‘citizen as a customer’ – (Bennigsen-Foeder, 1988).

Other models have been based on Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour. Subsequent studies indicated the necessity of considering ethical obligation (e.g. Shaw & Clarke, 1999) and self-identity (e.g. Sparks & Shepherd, 1992) as supplementary elements to Ajzen’s (1991) theory. Shaw, Shiu and Clarke’s (2000) and Shaw and Shiu’s (2002) research supported previous studies indicating that the consideration of ethical obligation and self-identity turn subjective norm (i.e. other’s attitudes and the motivation to comply) into a non-significant factor. These studies highlighted the over-emphasis of ‘attitude’ in the explanation of behavioural intentions. Since, in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, attitude involves an evaluation of beliefs, this could indicate that ethical obligation and self-identity could be variables disassociated from the rational-cognitive path, with possible links to the affective process. These findings point out the necessity of updating existing models of consumer decision making through the inclusion of additional variables in the modelling of consumer decision making. Emotions are patently a potentially powerful category of variables; previous research has already highlighted their potential in the explanation of ethical consumer decision making (e.g. Shaw & Clarke, 1999). Although Marks and Mayo’s (1991) research pointed out an ‘emotional footprint’ (i.e. feelings such as remorse, shame, guilt, embarrassment, and anxiety) of those respondents selecting an unethical option, no further attention was paid to these emotions.

The need for further research on emotions, particularly SCEs, in ethical consumption is also supported by studies that acknowledged the need for ‘moral self-realisation’ (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) and the labelling of identity through consumption (Cherrier, 2005). It is possible to argue that, in the context of ethical consumption, the concept of ‘self’ (e.g. self-direction, self-respect, and self-identity) is central to consumers’ evaluation (Shaw, Shiu, & Clarke, 2000). It follows that emotions (as essential components of the self) and more particularly self-conscious emotions, are likely to influence ethical/unethical consumers and that their manipulation could have a significant impact on purchase habits.

A framework for application

The distinct features and functions of SCEs and the existing gaps within the ethical consumption literature show the potential explanatory power of SCEs as a variable in ethical decision making and, possibly in consumer research more generally. The following framework (Figure 1) summarises the potential role of SCEs.
The initial stage is the acknowledgement of an ethical issue in a consumption context (1), which subsequently generates an emotional response i.e. SCEs (2) and a cognitive reaction (3). Unlike other models or theories of ethical consumer decision making (previously mentioned in this paper), the current framework implies a continuous interaction between affect and cognition, and the fact that emotions are potentially as influential as some reasoning processes. The fact that emotions have often been researched discretely (from cognitive processes) does not mean that they are subordinated to them or that they are not powerful drivers of behaviour in their own right.

As the framework shows, an ethical stimulus in a consumption context can engage the consumer both in emotional filtering (4) via SCEs (2) and in rational evaluation (5) via cognitive reaction (3), which lead to an ethical judgement (6). Subsequently, once an ethical judgment is made (6) and the consumer behaves accordingly (7), the SCE can dissipate or persist (8). At stage 8 the generated emotion can be the initial SCE or can be a different one. There is the possibility that certain behaviours can generate more than one type of emotion because in many situations the individual experiences a cocktail of emotions rather than a solitary one (e.g. in an ethical consumption situation shame and guilt can arise together). If a
new emotion is generated during stage 8, this can be either positive or negative. For example, it is likely that an ethical decision will generate pride, whereas an unethical decision will trigger guilt. Next, whether the self-conscious emotion persists or dissipates, this will influence the perception of future ethical consumption related issues (9) and future consumption behaviour (10). As portrayed in the framework stages 8, 9 and 10 are related to a consumption context. In this case the SCEs act as integral emotions (for detailed explanations see Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007). Alternatively, stages 8a, 9a, and 10a can occur simultaneously and in this case SCEs act as incidental emotions (Han, Lerner, & Keltner, 2007). This means SCEs demonstrate a carryover effect in a non-consumption context, by influencing future perception (9a) and behaviour (10a). More specifically, the carryover effect refers to ‘the emotion and appraisal [that] encourage and facilitate [actions that]…have no bearing on the situation that launched the decision episode in the first place (e.g. the person made fearful for his job proceeds with unusual caution in non-job related social settings)’ (Yates, 2007, p. 180). For example, the manifestation of the carryover effect in ethical non-consumption related issues could be reflected in one’s work ethics and attitude/behaviour towards asylum seekers or homeless people. The framework also suggests that the carryover effect can influence the initial perception of an ethical issue in a consumption context (see Feedback A), and that stages 9a and 10a could subsequently influence the manifestation of SCEs in a consumption context (Feedback B).

**Conclusion and future research**

The framework describes a simplified, linear process; in the context of everyday and continuous purchase situations this would most likely unfold as a cyclic and recursive process. The framework is presented here as a device to articulate the points made in the literature review and to emphasise the logic for further investigating SCEs in the context of ethical consumption. The framework presented here also represents an advancement of Elliott’s (1998) model of emotion driven choice which however underplays the interaction between emotions and cognition in the decision-making process. In his model, emotions are a consequence of a purchase decision, whereas the current framework portrays SCEs as being generated by an ethical stimulus (2) and latter on as consequences of behaviour (7). Moreover, at stage 8, the generated emotion can be the initial one or a different emotion, impacting on future perception and behaviour. All these additional considerations point out the ability of the current framework to capture the complexity of consumer decision making in greater detail and in addition to highlight its suitability for application in the context of ethical consumption. However, two limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the framework does not capture the external factors that can determine a certain level of knowledge about ethical/unethical products which contribute to the rational evaluation (5). Secondly, the model takes a linear approach to decision making which is a simplifying assumption.

There are a number of possibilities for interpretive or more deductive methods. For example future research could: a) explore whether and which positive or negative SCEs are used by buyers to discriminate between ethical and unethical choice, b) compare the influence of positive versus negative SCEs in ethical decision making, c) investigate the anatomy of the carryover effect on perception and future behaviour, d) examine how culture impacts on the influence of particular SCEs on the ethical decision making process, e) investigate the durability of SCEs both as integral and incidental emotions, f) study the pattern of interactions between different types of SCEs or between SCEs and basic emotions. These issues require a range of methods and approaches to be applied and might include depth interviews and experimental or survey methods. However as research in this area unfolds this paper has demonstrated that ignoring SCEs is not a sound option.
References


