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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1018786/volumes/ap11/AP-11

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ABSTRACT
An exploratory analysis of Japanese consumer behavior following the 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident disaster found that respondents preferred ethical (ouen) consumption to other helping behaviors, that the media played a significant role in shaping perceptions of safety, and that the type of empathy triggered led to differing responses.

JAPAN AFTER 3.11
The Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident disaster on March 11, 2011 (hereinafter referred to as “3.11”), wreaked havoc on the Tohoku region of Japan—an area whose economy is largely based on family-run fishing and farming. Not only were ports and farmlands destroyed by the tsunami, but the meltdown of the Fukushima nuclear plant also led to safety fears over Tohoku products, which devastated many livelihoods.

To help rebuild Tohoku after 3.11, businesses and consumers came together to help aid reconstruction efforts through ethical consumption (Ohira et al. 2014). This phenomenon was named ouen (aid) consumption by the media, and included cause-related marketing (CRM) and purchasing products from the Tohoku area. Ouen consumption flourished, in part, as a response to the perception that the people of Tohoku were suffering due to fuhyo higai (literally “harmful rumor damage”). Defined by Sekiya (2011) as “economic damage caused by media coverage of social issues that results in people perceiving ‘safe’ things as dangerous, and which leads to avoidance of consumption, tourism, and transactions” (p. 12), this term underscores the importance of media in shaping perceptions. The widespread use of this term after 3.11 led to an understanding of consumers as potential perpetrators of damage against Tohoku people, while stressing media responsibility to avoid causing such damage (“Lecture Series” 2014). Some have criticized this for suppressing voices of real concern by re-framing debates as “misinformed rumors that cause damage” (ibid.). Indeed, media coverage using this term emphasized that avoidance of “safe” Tohoku products hurt people and called for “level-headed” responses. Yet safety fears over Tohoku products are not merely based on “misinformed rumors,” but are of actual concern (Kurihara et al. 2012).

This paper explores ouen consumption as a new form of ethical consumption. Ouen consumption’s potential risks and non-Western origin make it distinctive from ethical consumption studied to date. It stands in contrast to many ethical consumption alternatives that are perceived as “more natural” and/or “healthier” (e.g., Dobscha & Ozanne 2001) with suggestions of positive benefits for consumers. In fact, no other ethical consumption alternative poses such potential non-Western cultures and practices (e.g., Harrison et al. 2005). By studying this new and novel practice, this paper helps to broaden the understanding of why consumers engage in ethical consumption.

METHOD
As ouen consumption is a relatively new type of consumer behavior with little past research, a qualitative exploratory study was chosen to gain broad insights into the meanings behind this behavior. Past research in Japan found that about 20% of consumers were ethical consumers, with a higher percentage among women with children (Stanislawski et al. 2013). Mothers also have high concerns about food safety (Hughner et al. 2007) and were considered to be sufficiently motivated to have thought through the implications of ouen consumption. To obtain as broad a range of views as possible within constraints, we used a two-tiered purposive sampling. First, mothers in their thirties to fifties living in the Greater Tokyo area were recruited from an online research panel to answer survey questions about their ethical (including ouen) consumption behavior. Out of the 1392 responses, consumers with high and moderate past experiences were invited to join a focus group. Two groups of each category were interviewed on August 28–29, 2013, in Tokyo (see Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews, which lasted 2–2.5 hours, asked about the impact of 3.11 on consumption, as well as ethical consumption behaviors in general. This paper focuses on responses related to the impact of 3.11 and ouen consumption. Inductive thematic analysis was used on transcribed data to identify patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke 2006).

FINDINGS
Consumption as a substitute—convenience and skepticism. Respondents shared that ouen consumption was a substitute for other helping behaviors such as volunteering and making monetary donations. All groups reported that consumption was an easier and more convenient way of helping society as compared to conventional charity.

At the end of the day, it’s just self-satisfaction, but I think it’s good if I can contribute through shopping, to make up for not being able to go [volunteer]. (1B)

On TV they say that it’s challenging because the number of volunteers is down... but, we can’t just go off to volunteer and not take care of our homes... We can’t do [it] because we don’t have time, but we do want to be of some help to society. (2G)

A common reason given for respondents’ inability to volunteer was the difficulty of being away from their homes for long periods. Volunteering is seen as something unfamiliar, time-consuming, and difficult to incorporate into their daily lives. Similarly, monetary donations were considered to require significant commitments that were beyond “normal.”

You have to go out of your way to donate to a donation box. But, if you can do it through shopping, it’s more casual. You buy what you want, and a portion is donated. Kills two birds with one stone. (1G)

I’m not a celebrity or a company, so my donation wouldn’t be much money. In comparison, buying a product is more casual and accessible. (1D)

Media coverage that highlighted large donations by companies and celebrities after 3.11 may have led to perceptions that donations need to be large in order to be effective. This reflects cultural unfamiliarity with volunteering and donations as compared to the West (Tsukamoto & Nishimura 2006, p. 579). In addition to the perceived
Donations are so vague and you don’t know where it goes. With CRM products, you know clearly where it goes. Some donations are clear where it goes, but I wonder if it’s really being used [as intended]. (1L)

I think big business is better than the Japanese Red Cross [JRC]… I think a big company delivers in good faith. The JRC […] had embezzlement. I trust big legitimate companies like McDonald’s more than these organizations. Businesses have accounting audits as a checking function, so it’s more trustworthy than the JRC. (2L)

It is seen that Japan’s non-profit sector has generally failed to establish familiarity and trust among respondents. Even the Red Cross—a globally recognized non-profit—suffered a loss of trust due to delays in payouts and embezzlement by an employee after 3.11. If consumers who engage in ethical consumption to help solve social issues lack knowledge and trust of non-profits, then average consumers are likely to be even less knowledgeable or sympathetic to them. In addition, media coverage of questionable activities related to donations after 3.11 may have enhanced this sense of skepticism. For example, stolen donation boxes, fraudulent donation collections, and other suspicious activities were reported in the news with calls for caution by the police: “In conditions where you’re not sure whether donations are actually being used for disaster-victims, don’t respond to calls for donations, and consult the police.” (“Donate Precious Metals” 2011).

Defining “safety”—confusion in the aftermath and re-framing by the media. In the immediate aftermath of 3.11, respondents were unsure about the safety of Tohoku products and avoided them. This fear was largely based on confusion of how “safety” was to be re-defined under the new circumstances. Subsequent media framing of avoidance of Tohoku products as “harmful rumor damage” (which by definition is not a legitimate worry) seems to have played a key role in changing respondents’ minds about whether to consume Tohoku products. Respondents also have accepted market mechanisms such as tests of radiation levels as a signal for safety, and trust in businesses over non-profits, though this tendency was higher in Group 2 where respondents lacked in-depth knowledge of non-profits and portrayed them to be “all the same.” Group 1 recognized that some non-profits were trustworthy, but still felt that due diligence was necessary when dealing with non-profits in general.

I have children, so I wondered if the rice was OK and I avoided it… but now, they say it’s OK, even on TV, so I buy rice from Fukushima without concern. [...] I saw on TV reports that people in Fukushima are struggling because of “harmful rumor damage” and I realized just trying to avoid [it] doesn’t change anything. (1I)

[I] saw on TV that people were struggling because rice from Fukushima wasn’t selling. The price was cheaper too, so I bought it… I bought it because it can’t be that bad since it’s being sold. (2G)

Despite this general acceptance of the “safety” of Tohoku products, there are still some lingering safety concerns. Respondents who largely avoided Tohoku products legitimized this by explaining that they had small children, a response which was met with acceptance from the group. It seems that an understanding has developed that products from Tohoku are safe to consume by almost all members of society, except for those who are most vulnerable to any potential harm—pregnant women and small children. This shows that “harmful rumor damage” has not been blindly accepted, but is being weighed against the risks of real potential damage.

Empathy—empathic concern vs. personal distress. All respondents expressed empathy for those affected by the disaster, but the dominant type of empathy differed by group. Group 1 exhibited more empathic concern, “feelings of warmth, compassion, and concern for others,” while Group 2 expressed more personal distress, “feelings of anxiety and discomfort that result from observing another’s negative experience” (Davis 1980, p. 85). When questioned how their shopping behavior changed after 3.11, Group 1 reported altruistic concern and their ability to help, while Group 2 emphasized self-focused distress and guilt. Group 1 shared how media coverage of 3.11 made them want to help those in need. They also believed that others shared this concern, and that together their actions would combine to make a difference.

Watching it all on the news hurt my heart… it’s such a small amount, but I thought if I can help just by shopping, then I want to [do so] as much as possible. (1B)

I try and do it even though [my efforts] are very small, because I think things will change if everyone does what they can. (1I)

Responding to the same question, Group 2 responded with self-focused concerns. 2C and 2F mentioned how the lack of bottled water made their life difficult after 3.11, while others expressed fear for their own safety.

How can you live when everything gets shut down? […] I started to become aware of what you need to keep [in stock] in case of disasters. (2B)

You don’t know when a big earthquake will hit Tokyo too. (2G)

When probed, they moved beyond their own discomfort and began to express concern for those directly impacted. However, even then, their word choices highlighted how 3.11 caused them distress. Overall, their reactions to 3.11 were spoken of in a more negative manner, with references to feelings of guilt and helplessness, whereas Group 1 focused on more positive aspects, such as their personal ability to help—even if only a little.

Right after the earthquake, on TV they said that things weren’t selling because of “harmful rumor damage.” When chatting with other moms, we did talk a bit: “Do you think we ought to buy [to help] them?” But, I have a small child, so I avoided things from Tohoku and [surrounding areas]. If it’s being sold it should be fine, but my husband and I talked about avoiding it. I don’t buy things from there. […] When there are lottery tickets or [other indirect ways to help] reconstruction, I do it partly because I feel guilty. For things to go back… because
it’s a region with lots of farmers and fishers, it won’t go back to the way it was if people don’t buy things. But, I can’t bring myself to buy things from Tohoku. I feel bad about it. (2J)

“Since I don’t volunteer, if the grocery store has an ouen fair or an ouen campaign, I buy more than I need… I buy things I don’t really need.” (2E)

It was seen that respondents’ natural empathy toward a large-scale disaster combined with media coverage of “harmful rumor damage” to create pressure to support ouen consumption. So, when safety concerns or other reasons made it difficult for them to act on this in a meaningful way, it resulted in feelings of guilt. Unlike Group 1 respondents who incorporated ouen consumption as an activity that fit into their lifestyles in a sustainable manner (“do what I can” mentality), these respondents used ouen consumption as a way to alleviate their own emotional distress—which is unlikely to be sustainable in the long-term and is reflected in their lower past experience over the years.

DISCUSSION

This paper analyzes ouen consumption—a new type of ethical consumption. It was found that the media strongly influenced Japanese consumers who chose consumption as a means to help reconstruction efforts after 3.11. Though confusion about the safety of Tohoku products resulted in avoidance immediately after 3.11, media coverage of “harmful rumor damage” re-framed such avoidance as misinformed and damaging behavior. Also, the very name “ouen” (aid) signals that such behavior helps support fellow citizens in need—clearly a “more ethical” alternative to perpetrating “harmful rumor damage.”

Several cultural factors underlie the acceptance of ouen consumption as a legitimate form of helping behavior in the aftermath of 3.11. Unfamiliarity with and skepticism of non-profits has resulted in consumption being perceived as a more convenient, trustworthy, and effective alternative to traditional helping behaviors such as volunteering and donating, which are more commonly practiced (and researched) in the West (e.g., Reed et al. 2007). Also, trust in big business and marketplace institutions has helped overcome concerns about the “safety” of Tohoku products. Yet, for the most vulnerable segments of the population, pregnant women and small children, there is still lingering hesitancy toward consumption.

In line with past research that analyzed empathy and helping behaviors, we found that empathic concern for 3.11 victims led to helping behavior with an emphasis on other-focused altruistic motivations, while emotional distress led to behavior focused on alleviating discomfort for the self (Batson et al. 1987). In addition, those expressing more empathic concern had higher frequencies of ouen consumption. This potential relationship between the type of empathy and frequency of helping behaviors over the long-term merits further study.

Due to its exploratory nature, this study is limited. It only considered mothers who have engaged in ouen consumption, whereas others may have different perceptions regarding ouen consumption, “harmful rumor damage,” and helping behaviors in general. While focus groups allowed for collection of diverse opinions, social desirability bias may have influenced discussions (though this was mitigated by grouping similar respondents). Future research can look at naturally occurring data (Silverman 2013) to test these findings. For example, analysis of mass media, personal blogs, and other media can clarify how the use of “harmful rumor damage” developed and influenced people’s consumption after 3.11.

Acknowledgement: We would like to thank Yoshida Hideo Memorial Foundation for funding this research.

Table 1 Respondent Characteristics

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