Antecedents and Outcomes of Consumer Uncertainty in Ethical Buying Decisions: a Conceptual Model

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Growth in consumer concern for ethical issues has been well documented. Consumers have been found to experience uncertainty in decision-making in terms of information, availability and choice, particularly in the area of purchasing ethical clothing. Given the pertinence of uncertainty in decision-making, this article explores the dimensionality of consumer uncertainty. While decision uncertainty has been examined in numerous product categories, little is known about decision uncertainty in the context of ethical products. A new multi-dimensional conceptualization of consumer uncertainty is developed as well as a hypothesized framework that offers an understanding of interrelated mechanisms. Managerial and research implications are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Ethical markets have experienced significant growth rates over recent years (e.g., Doane 2001; Taylor and Howard 2005). This research is concerned with ethical consumption in the context of purchasing clothing, an area where concerns may include the human welfare aspects of clothing production, use of animals and negative environmental impacts from production and the promotion of throw away trends. This context has been hindered by a lack of availability and information, particularly in the form of labeling, which has inhibited purchasing behaviour (e.g., Dickson 1999; 2001; Shaw and Duff 2002; Shaw et al. 2006a; 2006b; Tomolillo and Shaw 2004). Shaw et al. (2006a) outline, for example, that in seeking to avoid a sweatshop produced garment the consumer may consider country of origin and working conditions important factors in choice and wish to purchase a garment produced in their home country to alleviate these concerns. Conflict can arise, for example, between a concern to trade fairly with poorer countries, to promote their economies and a desire to support home-country production and minimize moral tensions. In such a situation ethically concerned consumers find themselves confronted by uncertainty in terms of both information available to aid decision-making and the consequences of their actions (Tomolillo and Shaw 2004).

While past research has highlighted problems of uncertainty in ethical consumer decision-making in terms of labeling, information and choice (e.g., Dickson 1999; 2001; 2005; Shaw and Duff 2002; Shaw et al. 2006a; 2006b), it has failed to fully examine consumer uncertainty as a theoretical concept, its drivers and their resultant impact on consumer decision-making and behavioural intention. Urbany et al. (1989) in exploring the purchase of appliances is one exception. This research aims to take this work forward by making several key contributions to the literature. First, we take up Urbany et al’s (1989, p. 213) call to develop and conceptualize a new dimension of evaluation uncertainty to capture “uncertainty about how to integrate the information available to form judgments.” In the context of ethical clothing decision-making, in addition to experiencing knowledge and choice uncertainty, as explored by Urbany et al. (1989), consumers may also encounter uncertainty when making purchase judgments in terms of information evaluation and integration. Second, we consider Urbany et al’s (1989) recommendation that the antecedents underlying the uncertainty dimensions be explored. Third, Urbany et al. (1989) examined the effect of uncertainty on information search. We extend their work by exploring both the impact of uncertainty on intention to purchase (thereby, examining the impact of uncertainty through to the point of actual behavioural intention) and on information search. Fourth, ethical concerns in clothing have been experiencing increased levels of consumer concern and media attention (e.g., Taylor and Howard 2005), however, understanding of consumer decision-making in this area remains limited. Pertinent is an understanding of how consumers respond to and manage their ethical concerns under conditions of uncertainty. To extend the literature-based insights on consumer decision uncertainty, we draw on qualitative research. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using different samples of ethical consumers.

Findings from the qualitative analysis give rise to a theoretically grounded model. In proposing this model, the study sheds light on how consumer uncertainty affects information search and behavioural intention. This research identifies four antecedents of consumer uncertainty, namely, credibility, complexity, conflict and ambiguity. Consumer uncertainty dimensions consist of knowledge, choice and evaluation uncertainty. In addition to the hypothesized relationships between antecedents and the three uncertainty dimensions, two postulated consequences, intention to engage in external information search and behavioural intention, are formulated. The conceptual nature of this study gives rise to the desirability of future work on this topic.

REFERENCES


