Meanings of Ethical Consumption in Fashion and Clothing Markets

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Much of the previous research on ethical consumption has tended to divide ethical consumption into two opposite categories or to define ethical consumption a priori. In this paper my aim is to argue that a more nuanced understanding is needed. Drawing on normative ethics and cultural consumer research this study brings new insights into ethical consumption fashion and clothing consumption. The preliminary findings of consumer interviews conducted suggest that ethical stances to consumption appear as rather complex constructions, and that ethical conduct in the marketplace is under continuous negotiation.

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interpersonal influence and the number of previously purchased products of the brand as a control. For the attitude DV, attention to brand placements was also added, and for the purchase intention DV, both attention to the placements and attitude were included.

Self connectedness was a significant predictor of whether they had seen the brand in soap operas (\(Std B=0.00, t(114)=2.45, p<.05\)), but not network connectedness (\(Std B=0.00, t(114)=0.5, p>.05\)).

Attitudes toward the brand (\(\alpha=.72\)) were generally positive (M=1.42; 1=high). In turn, having seen the brand in soap operas was a significant predictor of attitude toward the brand (\(Std B=.24, t(113)=2.10, p<.05\)), but neither self nor network connectedness impacted attitudes toward the brand directly.

Finally, in terms of purchase intentions, controlling for the number of previously purchased items, we found that participants were more likely to purchase the brand if they had seen it in soap operas (\(Std B=0.19, t(109)=2.00, p<.05\)), and we also found the predicted direct effect of network connectedness (\(Std B=.24, t(109)=2.24, p<.05\)), which significantly increased the model fit (\(\Delta R^2=.04, F(1, 109)=5.01, p<.05\)).

Conclusions

Data collected through a field study of Brazilian consumers of a high-end fashion brand promoted with soap opera celebrities in marketing campaigns show that the effect of network connectedness on purchase intentions operates independently from the already documented effect of self connectedness (Russell et al. 2004). Self connectedness indirectly affects purchase intentions through greater awareness of brands placed in soap operas, which increases attitudes’ favorability toward the brand. In addition, network connectedness has a direct effect on purchase intentions. Our findings suggest that marketers should take social network connectedness into account when planning strategies involving product placement and celebrity endorsement.

References


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Ethical consumption is not a recent phenomenon, although lately, related to globalization and sustainable development, it has become *in vogue* again. Since the culture of consumption is deeply embedded in the dominant organizing framework of modern societies, advancing more sustainable consumption practices has become quite a problematic task as Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero (1997) have argued. Indeed, Bucholz (1998) has suggested that a move towards more sustainable consumption would need to be seen in the light of changes in the ethics governing our societies.

Much of the previous research on ethical consumption has tended to divide ethical consumption into two opposite categories or to define ethical consumption a priori. In this paper, however, my aim is to argue that a more nuanced understanding is needed. Drawing on normative ethics (Barnett, Cafaro & Newholm 2005) and cultural consumer research (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Moisander & Valtonen 2006), I aim to bring new insights into the diverse representations of ethical consumption, and to open up new discussion on the notion of ethical consumption. The context of this study is fashion and clothing market that, as a highly global environment, offers a particularly interesting setting for studying consumer behavior in the contemporary marketplace.

My aim in this paper is to present the preliminary findings of the consumer interviews that I have conducted for my Ph.D. study. The cultural approach that I have adopted in this study has not been applied much of the previous research on ethically oriented consumption of fashion and clothing (e.g. Iwanow, McCracken & Jeffrey, 2005; Joergens, 2006). To investigate empirically how consumers discursively construe and negotiate meanings of consumption in fashion and clothing markets and how ethical consumption is constituted and negotiated in this context, I have been conducting long interviews (McCracken 1988) in Helsinki, Finland, in 2007-2008. In the analysis I am applying a discourse analytic approach that draws both on the ethnomethodological (Potter 1996, 1997; Potter & Wetherell 1987) and Foucauldian traditions on studying discursive formations and practices (Gubrium & Holstein 2000, 2003).

In this study fashion and clothing markets are understood as a cultural production system (McCracken 1986; Peñaloza 2000, 2001; Peñaloza & Gilly 1989), which offer certain cultural discourses as Thompson and Haytko (1997) have described in their model of consumer-centered dialogical process of meaning appropriation. The sample of my study consists of 18 consumers that were 25-35-years-old, all with a university degree, working and without children. Since ‘being informed’ and ‘having enough money’ have been often addressed as reasons for not being able to act in a more sustainable manner, this sample is expected to add to this discussion. The participants
were recruited by snowball sampling. The participants were allowed to freely talk about ‘consumption’, ‘fashion’ and ‘clothing’ without imposing particular conceptual frames on these terms.

The interview talk produced for this study is understood to be speaking to and emerging from the cultural ways of understanding and talking about a certain phenomena (Silverman 2001; Rapley 2004; Moisander 2001). I view the descriptions giving access to the shared cultural discourses of fashion and clothing consumption and its ethical dimensions. As Rapley (2004) has argued, such descriptions derive from and produce culture. According to Peräkylä (1997) the results of a case study can be understood generalizable when generalizability is understood as what is possible in other settings as well. In the era of globalization consumers, too, are increasingly global, and consumption experiences and practices seem to be taking new, global forms. Therefore, at the level of cultural discourses, the descriptions consumers produced in the interviews are probably also detectable from a wider cultural context.

The preliminary findings of my study suggest that (1) ethical stances to consumption appear as rather complex constructions, and (2) that consumers actively participate in these meaning-making processes. Moreover, (3) discussions on sustainability and ethicality constructed as limits for sustainable consumption the impossibility to over-simplify one’s life style and the unwillingness and ‘incapability’ to consume less. In addition, (4) discourses on the marketplace actors focused mainly on consumers and companies ignoring other possible actors.

Being ‘a conscious consumer’ can take a myriad of forms. Consumer meanings should thus not be divided only to two opposing categories such as ‘ethical’ and ‘unethical’ consumption. A more nuanced understanding of cultural principles and categories (McCracken 1986) is needed. Ethical consumption can mean, for instance, buying environmentally friendly products, evaluating the social responsibility of a brand or a company, and giving old clothes to charity.

Consumers are not passive, empty containers waiting to be filled up (e.g. Moisander & Valtonen 2005). For example, quality can hold up in changing fashions. In addition, personal style and fashions are continuously negotiated. This consumer meaning-making could be integrated better within the fashion and clothing industries. At the level of consumer theory this finding contributes to the further development of the notions of cultural discourses in the Thompson’s & Haytko’s (1997) model of consumer-centered dialogical process of meaning appropriation.

Discussions on sustainability and ethicality constructed as limits for sustainable consumption the unwillingness to over-simplify one’s life style and the ‘impossibility’ to consume less. However, consumption and its role in having a good quality of life were also under negotiation. Making visible the discourses consumers call on when discussing the role of consumption in self-enhancement, social esteem and other immaterial rewards (Heiskanen & Pantzar, 1997) becomes thus important and should be further elaborated on.

Consumers and companies were addressed as the main actors in the marketplace. Discussions on the global responsibilities of different market actors tended to place most of the ethical problems on the supply and not the demand side. This echoes the findings presented by Connolly and Prothero (2003). It should be noted that the markets can not only offer but also limit the available cultural discourses. The silent moments when discussing the actions taken by other markets actors, such as governmental institutions, to advance sustainability can be interpreted as indicating limited discourses available (Moisander & Valtonen 2005).

References