

The Beauty and the Cruel: The Price of Ethics

Authors : Camila Lee Park, Mauro Fracarolli Nunes

Abstract : Understood as the preference for products and services that do not involve moral dilemmas, ethical consumption has been increasingly discussed by scholars, practitioners, and consumers. Among its diverse trends, the defense of animal rights and welfare seems to have gained particular momentum in past decades. Not surprisingly, companies, governments, ideologues, and virtually any institution or group interested in (re)shaping society invest in the building of narratives oriented to influence consumption behavior. The animal rights movement, for example, is devoted to the elimination of the use of animals in science, as well as of commercial animal agriculture and hunting activities. Although advances in ethical consumption may be observed in practice, it still seems more popular as rhetoric. Diverse scholars have addressed the disparities between self-professed ethical consumers and their actual purchase patterns, with differences being attributed to factors such as price sensitivity, lack of information, quality, cynicism, and limited availability. The gap is also linked to the 'consumer sovereignty myth', according to which consumers are only able to choose from a pre-determined range of choices made before products reach them. On the other hand, academics also debate ethical consumption behavior as more likely to occur when it assumes compliance with social norms. As sustainability becomes a permanent issue, customers may tend to adhere to ethical consumption, either because of an individual value or due to a social one. Regardless of these efforts, the actual value attributed to ethical businesses remains unclear. Likewise, the power of stakeholders' initiatives to influence corporate strategies is dubious. In search to offer new perspectives on these matters, the present study concentrates on the following research questions: Do customers value products/companies that respect animal rights? If so, does such enhanced value convert into actions from the part of the companies? Broadly, we aim to understand if customers' perception holds performative traits (i.e., are capable of either trigger or contribute to changes in organizational behaviour around the respect for animal rights). In addressing these issues, two preliminary behavioral vignette-based experiments were conducted, with the perspectives of 307 participants being assessed. Building on a case of the cosmetics industry, social, emotional, and functional values were hypothesized as directly impacting positive word-of-mouth, which, in turn, would carry direct effects on purchase intention. A first structural equation model was analyzed with the combined samples of studies I and II. Results suggest that emotional value strongly impacts both positive word-of-mouth and purchase intention. Data confirms initial expectations on customers valuing products and companies that comply with ethical postures concerning animals, especially if social-oriented practices are also present.

Keywords : animal rights, business ethics, emotional value, ethical consumption

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