

Self-Regulation: The Moral Muscle in Online Ethical Consumerism

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Understanding what spurs consumers to buy environmentally sustainable (ES), so-called “green” products, can be elusive. Most people agree: buying green is an attempt to do the right thing. Yet there is variability in individuals’ adherence to this espoused belief, as expressed in product choices and purchase decisions. We expect the decision to buy green is influenced by both deliberate and automatic cognitive and affective processes that require self-regulatory management. To better understand ethical consumerism, we present theoretical propositions that unpack what supports movement from having a desire to buy green to actually making a purchase decision in an online setting.

INTRODUCTION

Some people would agree that buying a green product represents an ethically sound choice, and yet many of us do not act on this belief (Shaw et al., 2005). This incongruence may stem from the view that choosing one product over another will not make a worthwhile difference. Consumers may be unwilling to spend extra money and time that may be required when making informed environmentally sustainable (ES) purchases or to change consumption practices (Montgomery & Stone, 2009). A lack of commitment to buying green may also be attributable to erroneous, confusing, or conflicting information about ES issues and green products or the inability to make a connection between a purchase decision and actually resolving ES problems. The concept of ES associated with a product means that it does no harm, or, in comparison to other similar products, imposes less harm to the natural environment in its creation, use, and recycling or reuse. The product must also be on par with other offerings, in terms of quality, usefulness, and appeal. Whatever the rationale in forming a desire to buy green, the ultimate decision to do so may require additional effort in the consumer’s decision-making process. As a result, a person may have some initial desire to buy green, but not possess a strong enough compulsion to make an actual purchase.

Belk and Askegaard (1997) describe consumers’ desires as belief-based passions that involve fervently wishing for something. Passion plays an important role and conveys the influence of emotions, with positive and negative experiences consciously or automatically influencing a desire to proceed with action. The reality is that every purchase is a moral choice, suggesting that moral emotions are likely

involved (Heberlein, 1972). This is markedly so with product decisions that involve ES, which, by definition, have moral and social implications. With the Internet, social implications of one's purchase decisions are more visible than ever before. While ethical markets possess vast potential (Doane, 2001), we know very little about what fuels purchase decisions for ES (green) products when shopping online. To begin to address ethical consumerism, we posed this research question: *What influences movement from the desire to a decision to buy a green product in an online shopping context?* We begin with an overview of the relevant literature and then present a model to depict the role of self-regulation as an influencer in helping people move beyond desire and into ethical consumer action.

ETHICAL CONSUMERISM ONLINE

The Internet has become a global tool for word-of-mouth recommendations given to family, friends, and others through social networks. In general, shared information converts lower-order cognition and affect into higher-order information processes, leading to increased commitment (Bristor, 1990). Say that you hear about a green cleaning product from a community blog. This exposure may initially seem inviting, so you try it out and then share information about the product online. Gradually your consumption patterns may shift to include the purchase of other eco-friendly household supplies—especially after receiving affirmations from friends and acquaintances, and other social feedback. The credibility of message source, combined with the potential for consumer involvement in message content, contributes to these feelings and higher-order beliefs. Through multiple exchanges and interactions, one message can reach millions of consumers (Lau & Ng, 2001). Social media creates an omnipresent form of sustained influence.

Peer influence is a strong predictor of behavior. For moral action this can be even more powerful than one's own belief system (Zey-Ferrell et al., 1979). Word-of-mouth is a common venue for peer influence. Researchers concur that informal exchange of information through personal conversations can influence consumer choice and decision-making (Arndt, 1967), shape expectations (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996), and influence post-usage perceptions of products and services (Bone, 1995). Prior to the Internet, this form of communication was limited to individuals in a consumer's personal network (face-to-face, mail, telephone, etc.). Advances in online tools and the ways in which people connect in virtual environments have led to exponential growth in the amount of word-of-mouth information accessible to consumers.

Social media may be a powerful vehicle in guiding collective moral judgment. While there is debate about the relevance of online groups as communities, Hagel and Armstrong posit that "community has been at the heart of the Internet since its inception" (1997, p. 134). Simply labeling individuals as members of a group (e.g., green buyers) can activate a common identity (Tajfel, 1971). Social embeddedness with online contacts, like chat rooms and customer reviews, has the potential to increase peer influence, as online communication can enhance consumers' social identity and their social identification with a group (Lea et al., 2001). The Internet helps people learn about social causes and facilitates broad social involvement (Lebo, 2008). Consumers' online conversations contribute to social and economic outcomes, including educating consumers for environmental awareness (Kozinets et al., 2011).

People relate to one another in online communities in ways that can influence buying decisions (Bagozzi et al., 2007). With physical/temporal barriers eliminated, novel ways of connecting shift the meaning of social distance and may expand consumer agency. The Internet provides a venue for an expanded reach of relationships among people who acknowledge that they have something in common, with a resultant sense of commonality and solidarity. In many cases, networks replace locality as the basis for sociability and identity (Castells, 2001). Inasmuch as commonality influences how people broach social issues, such as exercising care for ES, it underscores the need to understand the forces that drive ethical consumer decision-making in the computer-mediated domain. Information shared does not have to be disseminated from someone we know personally in order for it to have an impact. Because social media networks provide a sustained context for ethical consumerism, we use this platform for our theory-building endeavor.

Ethical Decision-Making

Rest's (1986) moral decision-making model explains how people generally arrive at some level of moral behavior. While scholars target moral judgment as a central point (cf. Hunt & Vitell, 1986), research is needed to understand how people move from having a desire to act, to making a decision to act on that desire. An updated model presents the steps as: (1) awareness of the ethical issue, (2) desire to act, (3) decision to act, and the (4) ethical action (see Figure 1) (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007).

The internal/external factors that influence reasoning strategies and sensemaking, and their impact on ethical decision-making, are well known (cf. Caughron et al., 2011). But the gap between forming an intention and having an opportunity to act on it can be interrupted and thwart planned behavior (Bagozzi, 1992, 2006). Events can occur that block the implementation of one's plan for action. Such lack in follow-through may be attributed to a combination of internal factors, as well as external situational contingencies that occur earlier in the ethical decision-making process as well as after an intention is formed. Given the tenuous nature of sustaining consumer desires, we focus on the deliberative and automatic factors that bolster a decision to buy green. To unpack ethical consumerism in an online environment, a more granular understanding of the process is needed to advance mindful consumption. Since awareness is a precondition for the development of moral norms for ES actions (Heberlein, 1972), consumers need to be informed and reminded that making a purchase decision has ethical implications and moral repercussions. Once aware that product choice is an ethical issue, the willingness or desire to proceed with right action is needed. What fuels the decision to buy an ES product once ethical awareness and desire emerge?

ROLE OF SELF-REGULATION

Self-regulation is defined as goal-directed behavior ascribed to a particular timeframe (Baumeister & Heatherton 1996). This may be the regulation of achievement-related behaviors, personal strivings, and shared goals. Self-control is typically used to describe a narrower subset of self-regulatory processes, i.e., those that aim to override unwanted impulses or urges (e.g., buying something you cannot afford). In general, self-regulation entails three elements: (a) standards of thought, feeling, or behavior that individuals endorse, mentally represent, and monitor, (b) sufficient motivation to invest effort into reducing discrepancies between standards and actual states, and (c) sufficient capacity to achieve this in light of obstacles and temptations along the way (Hoffman et al., 2012). People lack self-regulation when standards, motivation, or capacity are not available.

People feel different types of desire when making a purchase decision. Both appetitive and volitive forms of desire can influence their choice, yet each element of desire is reasoned or felt and expressed in different ways. When referring to appetitive desires, we think of craving, hungering, or yearning for something; conversely, volitive desires are more about wishing, liking, or wanting something. The intensity of a volitive desire is a function of subjective and group norms, self-efficacy toward outcome expectancies, and anticipated emotions, as a person moves to fulfill a goal. The intensity of an appetitive desire is based on internalized factors, often biological, which serve to unleash latent desires. Sometimes a desire for a certain product leads to an immediate decision to buy it. This constitutes a deterministic outcome of a desire, typically occurring when primitive habits, urges, compulsion, or impulsivity operate. This can occur when self-regulation is absent or thwarted, or when first-order desires go unchecked deterministically (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). A direct link between desire and decision to act can be thought of as deterministic—either habitual or compulsive. This path can be interrupted by self-regulation, where desires become altered in one of two ways. Automatic self-regulation of desires to act occurs as a consequence of an orientation learned developmentally, often early in life (e.g., Kochanska, 1994; Posner & Rothbart, 2000), manifest as certain values, traits, or virtues. Conscious self-regulation of desire occurs through the willful application of personal standards to one's felt desire (first-order) and exemplifies a second-order desire governing a first-order desire. We now consider the impact of automatic and conscious regulatory influences that moderate the effect of a first-order desire to act on the decision to buy an ES product.

Automatic Self-Regulation

Personal values or virtues often function as automatic self-regulatory mechanisms, similar to the role of traits. These preestablished guidelines direct our responses. Regardless of their implicit/explicit form, personal values are inherent in our choices and behaviors, and vary depending upon the person and situation (Konrad, 1982). Family and peer influence, religious values, and personal needs shape each person and contribute to how they act when faced with an ethical issue (Barry, 1985). Scholars agree that personal values influence moral behavior (DiBattista, 1989). As adults, we carry a preconditioned set of values toward the natural environment, which plays an important role in guiding our actions. Standards that reside within our moral fiber, as Rokeach calls personal values (1977), prove useful in understanding and explaining sensitivity to the ethical dimensions of consumerism. To learn how values or virtues become lifestyle choices, we reference Aristotle, who claimed, “the man who is to be good must be well trained and habituated” (2009, NE IX: 9). If we want a sustained value of environmental care to influence purchase decisions, it needs to become a habit of choice. Daily life requires the ability to restrain certain impulses and desires, while channeling others in pursuit of valued goals. This is where self-regulation takes center stage, helping us overcome inertia and promote the desire to do good.

Self-regulation is so central to ethical action that Baumeister and Exline (1999) describe it as the master virtue, inasmuch as virtues entail overcoming selfish impulses for the sake of others. Responses in the form of thoughts, feelings, and desires can be regulated. Self-regulation is both key to adaptive success and central to virtuous behavior, especially if the latter requires setting aside the pursuit of selfish goals (Baumeister & Exline, 2000). Deemed a moral muscle and moral competency, self-regulation has been empirically linked to the ability to proceed with a decision to engage in moral courage, reflecting its value in the ethical decision-making process (Sekerka et al., 2011). Self-regulation may be inculcated in one’s personal values and traits. In an ideal scenario, a person self-regulates in the course of decision-making automatically, without even thinking about it. When exercised regularly, personal values can ultimately become second nature, evolving into or becoming ingrained character traits (Rokeach, 1977). Personal values serve as guiding principles in one’s life. But to be genuine and efficacious, they need to be applied to everyday thoughts and actions. If individuals exercise self-regulation regularly, in time they can influence their natural reactions from being less to more inclined to act in environmentally responsible ways.

The moral muscle of self-regulation can strengthen with use. While this capability may be firmly established in some, there is potential for development in most people. Thus, the likelihood to buy green as an ethical action may be influenced by increasing the value of ES awareness and self-regulation. Additionally, personal values arise through developmental and socialization processes and are often exercised as a response to explicit social influences (Schwartz, 1996). They can motivate behavior as well as justify past actions. We see that the operation of personal values as automatic self-regulation has the potential to moderate the effect of the desire to buy an ES product on the decision to buy it. To the extent a person has acquired personal values, traits, and virtues to act ethically, these personal factors can augment or attenuate the influence that a desire to act has on the decision to so act, depending on whether the value, trait, or virtue is consonant or dissonant with this desire (see Figure 1), stated as:

Proposition 1: Automatic self-regulation (in the form of personal values, traits, and virtues) moderates the relationship between the desire for and the decision to buy an ES product in a social media context.

When influenced by values, traits or virtues, the effects of self-regulation are largely automatic. But what about when self-regulation is consciously controlled? Could this be a way that decision-makers can transform desires into decisions to buy green?

Conscious Self-Regulation

Central to ethical consumerism is the ability to respond to and/or alter one’s emotional and motivational states. We need certain competencies to keep these states in perspective, relative to others

(Salovey et al., 1993). People who are aware of their emotions and motives and use them effectively impose self-regulation to their advantage. To facilitate ethical action, our emotions and motives must inform but not overwhelm our decision-making efforts. Building on self-regulation theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), emotional and motivational awareness, coupled with self-control, can be used to guide choices via incorporation of long-range considerations. This is an important component of ethical consumerism. Environmentally responsible action is expressed in how we select products and make decisions about what we choose to buy. To be more ethical, people need to practice becoming aware of their automatic responses. Consumers need to acknowledge that seemingly benign purchase decisions, when repeated, create habits that can be deleterious to the planet. Awareness and use of emotions and motives, practiced with self-regulation, are important in responding to purchase decisions and becoming an informed green shopper.

Frankfurt (1971, 1988) explained how people have the capacity for reflective self-evaluation, becoming aware of their motives, feelings, thoughts, and desires. He proposed that everyone has some capacity to evaluate their desires and decide whether they want (or do not want) to activate them, referring to this process as *second-order desires*. Bagozzi (2006) describes how decision-makers reflect on a felt (first-order) desire to act in a way that overrides or postpones further consideration or implementation of the desire to act. Thus, when a person is thinking about a first-order desire to act, he poses reflective questions such as: *Am I the kind of person who should have such a desire? Am I the kind of person who acts on this kind of desire? Is the desire I feel consistent with the kind of person I ought or wish to be? Will acting on this desire lead to my well-being?*

As people reflect on ES in their consumer purchase decisions, they might consider what effect acting on the desire to care for the environment will have on others, society at large, and the planet, over time. In a parallel manner, the consumer may reflect upon his lack of felt (first-order) desire to act. Here, the person considers whether to embrace, accept, or construct a desire to act, and questions analogous to those described may be exercised (e.g., *Is my not feeling a desire to act consistent with the type of person I wish to be?*). Given self-reflectivity, expectations are framed as second-order desires and moderate the effect of the first-order desire to act on the decision to act (see Figure 1), stated as:

Proposition 2: Conscious self-regulation (second-order desires) moderates the relationship between the desire for and the decision to buy an ES product in a social media context.

Based on recent developments made by emotion psychologists and organizational researchers, second-order desires develop and are influenced by two processes, self-conscious and moral emotions, along with social identity. We now turn to these factors as a potential resource for enhanced ethical consumerism related to ES.

SECOND-ORDER DESIRES

Self-Conscious and Moral Emotions

Self-conscious emotions (SCEs) help shape second-order desires. When young, we are socialized to different degrees to feel socially perceived or experienced emotions such as empathy, pride, guilt, shame, embarrassment, envy, and jealousy (Lewis, 2000; Tangney, 2003). When confronted with an opportunity and desire to act, a decision-maker may experience SCEs, depending on the nature of previous experiences and one's emotional history (e.g., how a person managed these emotions previously). Self-conscious emotions have personal and social connotations and bring the person who is experiencing them to consider the self as object and agent (Barret, 1995). Second-order desires are directly dependent on SCEs. In the case of pride, this helps a person to maintain self-esteem, signals important standards, and facilitates the acquisition of information about the self (as object and agent). Pride can show others that one has achieved valued outcomes, promoting competitive motives. Of course, pride must be self-managed, lest it lead to hubris, with negative social consequences (Lewis, 2000). Excessive pride can

actually cloud people's judgment and inadvertently support moral myopia. Hubris is considered maladaptive, associated with distortion and self-enhancement. Central to our model, is the notion that second-order desires respond to personal and social standards for conduct, entailed by positive and negative SCEs.

Relevant to developing a desire to act, SCEs experienced as a result of how others perceive our actions (what we buy), can elevate our desire to buy green (e.g., shame, embarrassment, guilt, pride and gratitude) (Tangney et al., 2007). Social self-conscious emotions are linked with a person's decision to adhere to moral standards and engage in prosocial behavior (Hart & Matsuba, 2007; McCullough et al., 2001). When a person anticipates or engages in doing something less than their best self or wrong, adverse feelings may occur (Michie, 2009). Conversely, when one anticipates or does something right or good, self-approval is a likely result. During reflection and evaluation, the concept of self typically becomes the object, prompting SCEs to serve as internal punishment or reinforcement for one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This internal moral barometer provides immediate and salient feedback on what one perceives as socially and morally acceptable (McCullough et al., 2001). Ethical challenges, decisions, and actions evolve in a social milieu. As people make online purchases, they consider the consequences of how their actions may be viewed by others, which, in turn, may produce emotional experiences to include general arousal, appraisals, or physiological reactions.

In general, shame results from a negative evaluation of oneself, as it pertains to being in community. It is viewed as the more *public* emotion arising from exposure and disapproval of a shortcoming or transgression as others view you (actual or anticipated) (Tangney, 1999). Shame threatens one's place in society or a group. This particular SCE fosters an acceptance of responsibility, rather than a tendency to point the finger in blame (Tangney et al., 1992). With guilt, feelings are considered *private*; hence, they tend to be proportionate with the severity of the situation. People who feel guilt see it as likely justified and less directed at the core of their person, centering more on the evaluations of one's behavior than on evaluations of self. A person experiencing guilt is relatively decentered, focusing on a negative behavior somewhat separate from the self. In focusing on a bad behavior, rather than a bad self, a person feeling guilt is more likely to recognize and be concerned about the effects of that behavior on others (Tangney, 2007, p. 349). Feeling guilty, one is primed to respond to negative cues with corrective action (e.g., change purchasing behavior to green products). Guilt can remind a person of their duty and upbringing on how one ought to act in an ethically challenging situation (Bagozzi et al., 2007). People who feel embarrassed are inclined to behave in conciliatory ways in order to win approval and inclusion (Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

When people experience moral emotions that affirm their actions, the affective experience encourages a sense of pride, gratitude, or elation. When appropriate and balanced, pride stems from an accomplishment that offers self-confirmation. Mascolo and Fischer (1995) define pride as an emotion "generated by appraisals that one is responsible for a socially-valued outcome or for being a socially-valued person" (p. 66). From this perspective, pride not only enhances self-worth but also encourages future behavior that conforms to social standards of what is valued or has merit. Appraisals associated with experiencing authentic pride are based on specific accomplishments and accompanied by feelings of genuine self-worth (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Authentic pride is a powerfully pleasant emotion or prized consequence that individuals experience when one's actions are valued by other members of their social networks. Scholars suggest that pride is a moral affect because it has the potential to promote self- and other-directed respect (Hart & Matsuba, 2007; Tangney, 1999). Gratitude and elevation are moral affects, usually associated with outcomes of being engaged in prosocial behavior or acts of moral goodness. People strive to achieve goals and/or to treat others well because of the pride they can experience when they succeed in these endeavors (Michie, 2009). Authentic pride can reinforce both achievement-oriented and prosocial behaviors. Emotional feedback informs individuals that actions enhance their acceptance among social group members (Tracy & Robins, 2007).

A constellation of SCEs play a role, especially when social media is involved in shaping a purchase decision. Consider choosing between two products, one is green—the other is not. You are aware through social interactions that this represents an ethical issue. When online, you share information about what

you buy and look to see what other people recommend (e.g., Facebook's "like" option). By not choosing an ES product, you might be perceived as someone who does not care for the environment or, worse yet, deemed socially irresponsible. Imagined perceptions may foster SCEs as regulatory queues to motivate right action (self-monitoring how you see yourself or how others may perceive you). Individuals typically want to mitigate negative perceptions and prompt positive ones. Avoiding guilt or shame and wanting to feel pride demonstrates how prefactual SCEs can motivate purchase decisions as a result of attending to internal cues. These suppositions are consistent with the theoretical and phenomenological literature, showing how SCEs are based on interpersonal contexts, both real and perceived.

Research on morality has traditionally focused on reasoning (Turiel, 1983; Kuhn, 1989). In fact, everyday reasoning previously excluded gut reactions, intuitive responses, and affective elements (Galotti, 1989). In the early 1980s a moral-emotional correction began to unfold (Haidt, 2001). As research on moral emotions increased, theorizing about morality shifted from reasoning and moved towards the affective elements, with an emerging focus associated with decisions to engage (or not engage) in ethical behavior. Haidt (2003) defines this group of feelings as being "linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent" (p. 276). Moral emotions provide motivational force to do good and avoid doing bad (Kroll & Egan, 2004). While there is some overlap with SCEs, moral psychologists have demonstrated the unique elicitors and action tendencies that make these particular feelings directly associated with moral action. But actual behavior is not necessary for moral emotions to have a demonstrative effect (Tangney et al., 2007). People anticipate their emotional reactions (e.g., guilt or pride) as they consider their behavioral alternatives. Thus, moral emotions can exert strong influence on choices and actions by providing feedback regarding both anticipated and actual (consequential) behavior. When moving from the desire to buy green to a purchase decision, positive and/or negative emotions can support progress by moderating the effect of the desire to buy on the decision to buy (see Figure 1), stated as:

Proposition 3: Social or self-conscious and moral emotions activate and/or support second-order desires to buy an ES product and thereby moderate the effect of first-order desires on the decision to buy an ES product in a social media context.

Social Identity

Another factor that shapes and constrains second-order desires is social identity (Ashford & Mael, 1989; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Membership in a group or organization can promote certain values or standards, used as potential criteria for second-order desires. Social identity entails self-awareness of group membership, feelings of attachment and belongingness to a group, and evaluative connotations that one is an important and valued member. As social identity grows, one becomes depersonalized and group standards become paramount. To the extent that the group instills standards that promote ES, it can help to shape second-order desires of group members in ways useful for the regulation of desires to act responsibly. When moving from the desire to be green to an actual purchase decision, social identity can support progress toward an ES product purchase. Conscious self-regulation, as influenced by second-order desires, is influential in moving from the desire to the decision to act ethically (see Figure 1), stated as:

Proposition 4: Social identity activates and/or supports second-order desires to buy an ES product and thereby moderates the effect of first-order desires on the decision to buy an ES product in a social media context.

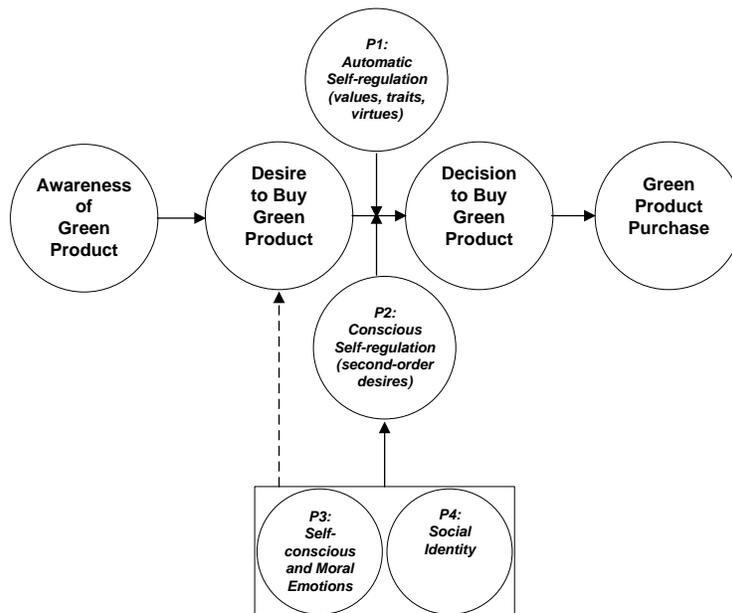
Under some conditions, self-conscious and moral emotions and social identity might directly influence a desire to buy or not to buy a product (see dashed arrow in Figure 1).

IMPLICATIONS

The notion of self-regulation as a moral muscle suggests that, with practice, one's strength can be increased. While self-regulation is firmly established in some people, there is a potential for enhanced development, particularly when applying it as a moral competency (cf. Sekerka, 2012) toward ES purchase decisions. The demand for green products may be increased by helping people manage their desires with more deliberate attention, focusing on what products align with their ethical identity.

For green consumerism to take hold, many people will need to change their buying habits. Behavioral models show that awareness is not enough to evoke change; people must have the willingness to alter

FIGURE 1
MOVEMENT FROM A DESIRE TO THE DECISION TO BUY GREEN



their thoughts and behaviors (Prochaska et al., 1997). Our work underscores how awareness and desire of an ES product may do little to move people into action. While the intent to act is essential, if a person's desire to buy a product is not bolstered by self-regulation, the desire can dissipate. Social media can play a demonstrative role in shaping a desire to buy green, but self-regulation will require individual personal development.

Given the global reach of the Internet, social media has a transformative element, potentially influencing how shoppers value green products and the desire to buy them. Segmenting consumers according to their personal social responsibility concerns and then communicating tailored information to them can cultivate ethical consumerism (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber 2011). Social media can be employed to initiate ES campaigns to target markets. Word-of-mouth via website recommendations, blogs, and tweets can promote additional awareness among friends (e.g., Facebook contacts). The use of identity descriptors or icons denoting green providers and consumers can be used to promote pride associated with green purchases. Given the embryonic stage of social media and the appeal of innovation in this realm, new forms of social marketing provide a frontier for ethical consumer research. The challenge will be to create lasting positive ES change and actually modify consumers' desire and decision to buy green over time, rather than to spark short-term bursts of interest.

To move beyond supposition our model needs to be empirically tested in a social media context. Advancing our understanding of why people choose to buy green—at a time when sustainability is at the forefront of new market creation—is a way to build the global economy. More importantly, ethical consumerism can extend the health and well-being of our shared existence on the planet. As such, this work is but a nascent step to advance multiple shared goals.

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