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Rethinking Value Creation for Sustainability

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Book of abstracts



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Is it always good to be green? The effect of ethical attributes on consumer preferences

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Abstract

In recent years, it has increased the number of products with social and environmental principles. When buying different products, consumers are confronted with a wide range of ethical options. Integrated into the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies, companies are using their practices not only for economic performance, but also accounting for their environmental and social impacts. However, it is questionable whether investments in sustainability positively impacts consumer behaviour. Previous studies showed that in some cases products with sustainability credentials could actually provide negative inferences toward the products (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin & Raghunathan, 2010).

There isn't a consensus of whether consumers perceive sustainability as something positive or negative. It is known that ethical attributes may induce consumers to make trade-offs on other important attributes such as price, quality, and performance (Olson, 2013). Therefore, it is questionable if these trade-offs limit the acceptance of ethical products. This study aims to analyse under what conditions ethical attributes generates positive inferences and whether they generate negative inferences.

Ethical attributes can be defined as attributes aimed to reflect social and environmental issues (Luchs et al., 2010). A set of consumer behaviour theories predicts that ethical attributes led to positive perceptions of the product. However, a different set of theories shows the opposite. We first analyse how consumers form perceptions of the greenness of products in the first place. After that, we explore how to overcome the barriers of ethical attributes.

To do so, we performed a review of main studies that relate consumer behaviour with the following topics: ethical attributes, ethical products, product sustainability, sustainable products, moral attributes. This article critically reviews recent empirical literature on ethical attributes and consumer inferences.

Main findings show that there are a wide range of factors that may affect consumers perceptions, categorized into the following topics: trade-off considerations; type of product; centrality of the green attribute; communication strategies. Each of these factors have different

subthemes that deserve special attention when designing and selling products with ethical appeals. In the end, we try to discuss how marketing strategies can overcome the barriers of ethical attributes.

With that, we position our research on ethical decision making. The current study answers the calls for research into the factors that can encourage ethical consumption, associated with sustainable products, trying to discuss the causal links between factors that affect the selection of products with ethical attributes and consumers preferences.

Main references

Luchs, M. G., Naylor, R. W., Irwin, J. R., & Raghunathan, R. (2010). The sustainability liability: Potential negative effects of ethicality on product preference. *Journal of Marketing*, 74(5), 18-31.

Olson, E. L. (2013). It's not easy being green: the effects of attribute tradeoffs on green product preference and choice. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 41(2), 171-184.