

The Relationship between Materialism, Consumers' Perception of Ethical Marketing, and Purchase Intention: Setting the Research Agenda

A working paper by:

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to gain a better understanding of how materialism can influence consumers' perception of ethical marketing, consumers' well-being, and purchase intention. The paper is based on a theoretical approach to develop an ethical marketing framework by reviewing the literature, while putting forth research hypotheses for future testing. First, the framework posits that consumers' perception of ethical marketing is influenced by materialism. Further, the framework identifies the relationship between consumers' perception of ethical marketing and consumers' well-being. Moreover, the model suggests that consumers' well-being influence their purchase intention. Understanding these relationships could provide guidelines on how to facilitate the adoption and successful implementation of ethical marketing. The paper contributes to ethical marketing by providing a research agenda for researchers and practitioners to pave the way for achieving improved marketing strategies by focusing on consumers' well-being and sustainability.

Keywords

Ethical marketing, materialism, consumers' well-being, consumers' purchase intention.

1. Introduction:

The high visibility of marketing activities and managers' efforts to administer their firms' relationships with its stakeholders including customers, employees, stockholders, and the general public, continue to keep ethics among the most challenging issues for marketing academics and practitioners (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007).

Ethical marketing literature has evolved into two categories namely: descriptive ethics and normative ethics. Descriptive (or positive) models of marketing ethics focus on explaining marketers' actual behaviors in ethical situations. In contrast, normative (prescriptive) marketing ethics is designed to advocate and establish guidelines for ethical marketing practice rather than attempt to report what practitioners say or do (Sirgy and Lee, 2008). While research efforts in the area of ethical marketing has increased dramatically over the last twenty five years with more depth and breadth of coverage and more publications in mainstream marketing journals, little research has been done concerning the normative questions of which values marketers should have.

Normative marketing ethics has focused much more extensively on ethical theories such as utilitarianism and deontology/duty-based ethics. However, the ability of these theories to provide the necessary guidance for marketers to address ethical issues has been questioned (Hartman and Beck-Dudley, 1999). Deontological theories have been criticized for being either too abstract or elusive to provide guidance or for being either too abstract or elusive to provide guidance or for being too strict to take the complex condition of a multi-cultural business environment into consideration. The exclusion of consequences is another potential shortcoming in a world where not everyone is willing to hold universal principles (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007). Another useful way of considering ethical marketing is to analyze a set of good habits commonly called virtues. While Hartman and Beck-Dudley (1999) advocated virtues/character ethics as introduced by the classic Greek philosophers suggesting that the ethics of virtue is a very relevant theory for improving the ethical conduct of marketers, they haven't demonstrated how its principles might be applied to marketing contexts.

Materialism has been the target of numerous social critiques. On one hand, materialism may increase society's economic wealth and material possessions. On the other hand, materialism has a negative overall effect on quality of life and a never ending quest for more material possessions is harming the environment (Muncy and Eastman, 1998). In addition,

individuals who focus on the acquisition of material objects exhibit reduced life satisfaction, diminished levels of happiness, and higher levels of depression (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). For these reasons, materialism harbors long-term negative consequences for both the society in general and the consumer in particular (Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002). While previous studies on materialism indicated that the relationship between materialism and well-being is complex and may be influenced by other factors (e.g. Burroughs and Rindfleisch, 2002), few researchers examined the factors that could mediate the relationship between materialism and consumers' well-being.

Considering the profound impact of marketers' decisions on the well-being of consumers and other stakeholders, it is important for firms to have specific guidelines to develop and implement marketing strategies in a socially responsible way (Lee and Sirgy, 2004). It is widely accepted that consumers' well-being plays many important roles in people's lives. For example, high levels of consumers' well-being lead to high levels of consumers' quality of life which reflect high levels of satisfaction, overall happiness in life, absence of ill-being, greater social welfare, and other positive attributes (Grzeskowiak and Sirgy, 2007; Sirgy, Lee and Rahtz, 2007). As such, consumers' well-being currently is one of the most important criteria that consumers consider when making decisions about purchasing products or services (Kim, Jeon and Hyun, 2012; Hwany and Lyu, 2015). Despite much has been written about consumers' well-being and the rising concern for ethical issues in marketing, no attempts have been made to link the concept of consumer's well-being to ethical marketing and little is known about the role of consumers' well-being in inducing positive behavioral intentions.

Consequently, this paper aims to contribute to the marketing literature by developing a conceptual framework that focuses on materialism drivers and consumers' well-being and purchase intention outcomes of ethical marketing. Specifically, the model highlights the effect of materialism on consumers' perception of ethical marketing behavior with regard to integrity, competence, respect, empathy, and transparency. Furthermore, evaluates the effect of ethical marketing as perceived by consumers on consumers' well-being and purchase intention. Moreover, determines the relationship between consumers' well-being and purchase intention.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the literature relevant to ethical marketing is reviewed. Second, the conceptual model of the study is presented and the

hypothesized associations between materialism, perceived ethical marketing, consumers' well-being, and purchase intention are formulated. Finally, the study concludes with areas of needed research in ethical marketing.

2. The concept of ethical marketing:

Marketers are often criticized for unethical marketing practices including the design and manufacture of poor quality products, failure to ensure product safety, false or misleading advertising, price gauging, foreign child labor, and abuse of channel power (Lund, 2000; Lee and Sirgy, 2004; Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007; Schlegelmilch and Öberseder, 2010). This perpetual debate has given rise to the notion of ethical marketing which is defined as “the systematic study of how moral standards are applied to marketing decisions, behaviors, and institutions” (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder, 2010, p.2). In essence, ethical marketing covers the societal and professional standards of right and fair practices that are expected of marketing managers in their strategy formulations, implementation, and control (Laczniak and Murphy, 2006). Brinkman (2002) provided a more narrowly focused definition of ethical marketing:

Ethical marketing examines systematically marketing and marketing morality related to 4Ps issues such as unsafe products, deceptive pricing, deceptive advertising or bribery, and discrimination in distribution. Other issues are related to exploitation of consumer weakness or using PR for preventing critical journalism and public debate (p. 159).

Ethical marketing has undergone a broadening list of topics and a move to include ethical issues from the customers' perspective. Some of the most prevalent are as follows: product safety, advertising and promotion trust, price fairness, power within the channels of distribution, marketing research responsibilities, privacy in electronic communication, sales ethical challenges, religious values and ethics, and vulnerable consumer issues (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007).

Research on ethical marketing appeared in the late 1960s with the pioneering work of Bartels (1967) who provided the first conceptualization of factors influencing marketing ethics decision-making. The research tradition on ethical marketing continued in the 1970s with steady growth on the subject. However, it was not until the early 1980s that the important role of ethics in marketing become widely recognized by marketing academics and practitioners (see reviews by Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007; Schlegelmilch and Öberseder,

2010; Ferrell *et al.*, 2013). Laczniak (1993) observed that the state of ethical marketing at that time was characterized as having broader coverage, greater academic visibility, and a developing theoretical and empirical foundation.

Among the developments in ethical marketing during recent years has been the recognition of the distinction between descriptive and normative work in the field. Descriptive (or positive) contributions in marketing ethics aim to describe, explain, and possibly predict ethically relevant marketing activities, processes, and phenomenon (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007). Examples of emerging descriptive theories are models from Ferrell and Gresham (1985), Hunt and Vitell (1986), Ferrell, Gresham and Fraedrich (1989), and Jones (1991). These models attempt to capture the ethical decision-making process and all the organizational, social, cultural, situational, and personality related factors that influence the various components of the decision-making process.

Normative (or prescriptive) marketing ethics attempt to prescribe what marketing organizations or individuals ought to do or what kind of marketing systems a society ought to have (Nill and Schibrowsky, 2007). Unlike descriptive frameworks, normative marketing ethics focus less on what organizations do and instead emphasize what marketing organizations ought to consider to better evaluate and improve their ethical behavior (Laczniak and Murphy, 2006). Without this normative tradition, positive decision models couldn't provide direction to marketers for acceptable behavior (Ferrell *et al.*, 2013). Despite the interest in normative frameworks, the majority of articles on ethical marketing take an empirical positive perspective and the analysis of fundamentally normative questions is underrepresented.

The traditional normative ethical theories of utilitarianism and deontology/ duty-based ethics have received some discussion in recent years (e.g. Nantel and Weeks, 1994). Utilitarianism focus on the consequences of actions and decisions is based on expected rewards or punishments, whereas deontological theories focus on specific actions or behaviors as right or wrong (Shanahan and Hyman, 2003). An important disadvantage of these theories is the use of quandaries as the basis for discussion and analysis in ethical marketing theory and research. Quandaries are scenarios which require individuals to guess how they might act in a certain ethical situation. Using quandaries doesn't capture the virtue ethics notion that all decisions have contexts and a particular context may have significant bearing on the evaluation of what is considered virtuous. They are also argued to be relevant

to moral problems only because they determine what counts as a moral problem (Hartman and Beck-Dudley, 1999).

One normative ethical theory that have received less attention is virtue/character ethics. Virtue/character ethics is defined as a qualitative characteristic generally considered as part of a persons' character although neither materially nor biologically identifiable (Ndubisi, Nataraajan and Lai, 2014). Virtue ethics is different from the other theories in that it focuses on the individual and the organization rather than a specific problem or dilemma. In addition to practicing good habits and placing emphasis on individual/corporate character, other features of virtue ethics include the importance of imitating behaviors of mentors/elders, that virtues are learned and practiced, and that the aspirations of the community are a big motivator. Another aspect of the virtue approach is the ethic of the mean which states that practitioners of virtue ethics succeed by seeking balance in their lives (Murphy, Laczniak and Wood, 2007). Thus, virtue/character ethics adds another critical element to the analysis of ethical marketing and doesn't necessarily replace other theories. The proposed conceptual model as well as the literature relevant to the association between materialism, perceived ethical marketing, and consumers' well-being are explained in the subsequent section.

3. Conceptual model and research hypotheses:

Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model. First, this paper examines the influence of consumers' materialism three facets identified by Richins and Dawson (1992) as: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success. As for the behaviors of ethical marketing, the study adopts the dimensions identified and supported by previous studies namely: integrity, competence, respect, empathy, and transparency (e.g. Murphy, 1999; Shanahan and Hyman, 2003; Murphy, Laczniak, and Wood, 2007). In addition, the study hypothesizes that consumers' perception of ethical marketing influences consumers' well-being and purchase intention. Moreover, the study explores the direct relationship between consumers' well-being and purchase intention.

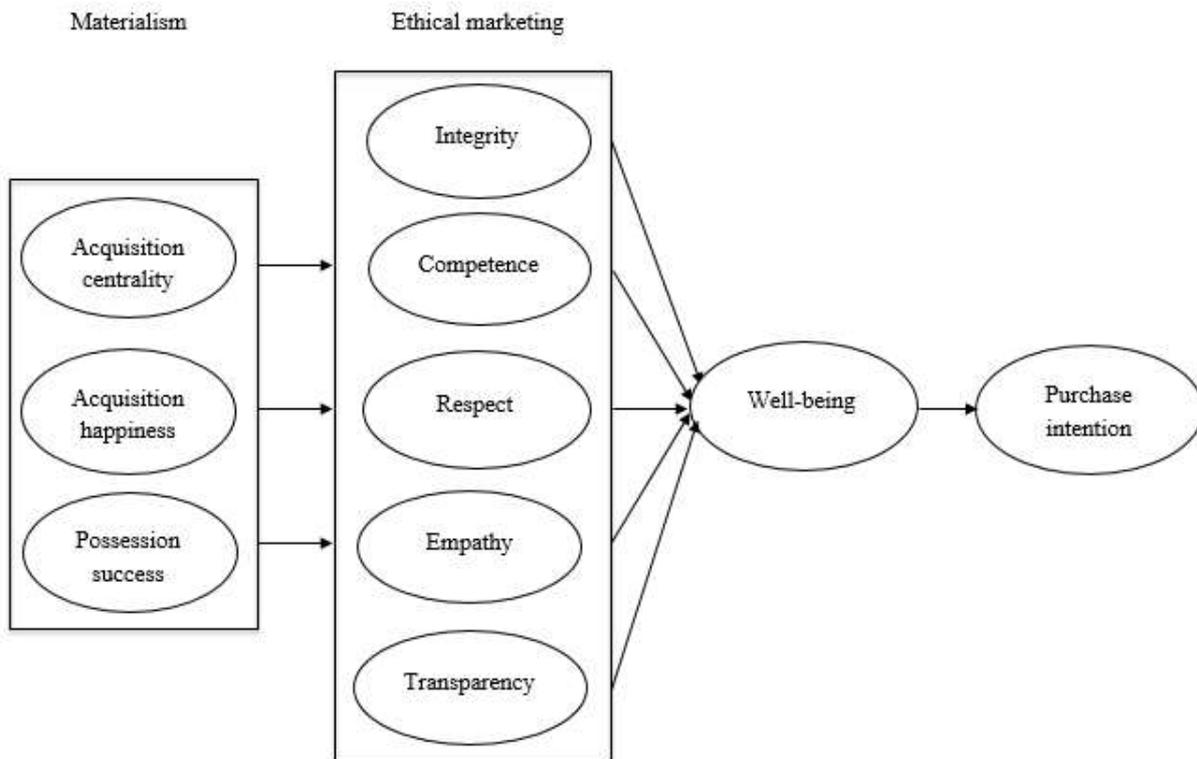


Figure 1 Proposed Research Model

3.1 Influence of materialism on ethical marketing

Materialism has attracted considerable interest in recent years from marketers and researchers. According to Richins and Dawson (1992) materialism is defined as “the importance a person places on possessions and their acquisition as a necessary desirable form of conduct to reach desirable states including happiness” (p. 307). At the highest levels of materialism such possessions assume a central place in a persons’ life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Belk, 1985). Materialism is also used to express an individual’s effort to define his or her social identity including social class and status based on possession of certain goods (Demirbag, Sahadev, and Mellahi, 2010).

The literature is dominated by two conceptualizations of materialism (Belk, 1985; Richins and Dawson, 1992). Belk (1985) conceptualized materialism in terms of three constructs namely: possessiveness (i.e. the tendency to control or own ones’ possessions), non-generosity (i.e. an unwillingness to share possessions), and envy (i.e. displeasure at the superiority of another person). Richins and Dawson (1992) developed a value-oriented scale of materialism with three facets namely: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of

happiness, and possession-defined success. Acquisition centrality assumes that the materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the focus of their lives. Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness suggests that possessions and their acquisition are vital to materialists' satisfaction and well-being. Finally, possession-defined success relates to the role possessions play as evidence of success and proof of right mindedness. Indeed, consumers with high levels of materialism based on this scale are found to be more self-oriented and less concerned with others (Chowdhury and Fernando, 2013).

The current research uses Richins and Dawson (1992) three-component conceptualization defined as: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success because it is widely used, has positive psychometrics properties, and represent different dimensions of materialism, thus permitting a complex view of this consumer characteristic (Goldsmith, Flynn and Clark, 2011).

Previous research on materialism portrayed materialism as a negative consumer characteristic. For example, Muncy and Eastman (1998) evidenced a negative link between materialism and consumers' ethical beliefs. The results indicated that materialistic consumers were less concerned with ethical issues although they might not possess lower ethical standards than less materialistic consumers. Similarly, Lu and Lu (2010) revealed a significant negative relationship between materialism and consumers' ethical beliefs among Indonesian consumers. Further, the relationship between materialism and consumers' ethical judgment was significant with active unethical behavior (Baker, Lee and Hashim, 2013). Adib and El-Bassiouny (2012) also showed that the materialistic people were perceived negatively in Egypt. Moreover, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) contended that the interaction between materialism and collective-oriented values was associated with a heightened degree of psychological tension (i.e. stress). They found stress to be a key mediator of the relationship between materialism and subjective well-being of individuals with high levels of collective-oriented values.

Although a good deal of research effort has been devoted to understanding materialism in recent years and there has been considerable empirical work examining the relationship between materialism and consumers' ethical beliefs (e.g. Muncy and Eastman, 1998; Lu and Lu, 2010), researchers have remained quiet on the influence of materialism on consumers' perception of ethical marketing behavior. Therefore, the researcher uses Richins and Dawson (1992) conceptualization of materialism and hypothesizes that materialism three facets

namely: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success influence consumers' perception of ethical marketing:

H1. Integrity is a function of materialism facets namely: a) acquisition centrality; b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and c) possession-defined success.

H2. Competence is a function of materialism facets namely: a) acquisition centrality, b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and c) possession-defined success.

H3. Respect is a function of materialism facets namely: a) acquisition centrality, b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and c) possession-defined success.

H4. Empathy is a function of materialism facets namely: a) acquisition centrality, b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and c) possession-defined success.

H5. Transparency is a function of materialism facets namely: a) acquisition centrality, b) acquisition as the pursuit of happiness; and c) possession-defined success.

3.2 Influence of ethical marketing on consumers' well-being

This study proposes that consumers' perception of ethical marketing impact his/her well-being. Consumers' well-being is defined as consumers' satisfaction within the various consumer life subdomains. Thus, the subdomains of consumer life need to be specified to measure consumers' well-being (Lee *et al.*, 2002). Consumers' life subdomains are most appropriately conceptualized in terms of the entire consumption process namely: acquisition (i.e. purchase), possession (i.e. assembly), consumption (i.e. use), maintenance (i.e. possession), and disposition (i.e. selling, trade in or junking the product), because there is much evidence that consumers experience satisfaction and dissatisfaction across the entire consumption process and that consumers' satisfaction influences other life domains affecting consumers' well-being (Wilkie and Moore, 1999; Lee *et al.*, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, consumers' well-being is operationalized as a state of objective and subjective well-being involved in the five stages of consumer life cycle (e.g. Lee and Sirgy, 2004; Sirgy and Lee, 2008).

Prior research elaborated on the applicability of a virtue/character ethics in marketing that organizations could use to identify the incongruent dimensions between the ethical

cultures of exchange partners, ethically congruent hires, and reasons for employee turnover (Murphy, 1999; Shanahan and Hyman, 2003). Murphy (1999) delineated five core virtues for international marketing defined as integrity, fairness, trust, respect, and empathy. Hartman and Beck-Dudley (1999) proposed specific virtues relevant to marketing defined as friendliness, shame, excellence, honesty, and trust. Behavioral integrity, transparency, and trust were found to impact team performance (Palanski, Kahai and Yammarino, 2011). A study by Ndubisi, Natarajan and Lai (2014) revealed that ethical marketing norms namely: price and distribution, information and contract, product and promotion, and general honesty and integrity significantly influenced relationship quality and commitment in the context of legal services. Further, Perret and Holmlund (2013) developed a framework to analyze the elements of ethical relationship marketing including: trust, commitment, loyalty, diligence, dialogue, and transparency. The results indicated that the framework was useful in capturing ethical relationship marketing from a holistic perspective. Moreover, consumers' perception of unethical marketing practices of firms decreased consumers' trust, reduced the degree of satisfaction with the firm, and in turn their loyalty (Leonidou *et al.*, 2013; Leonidou, Leonidou and Kvasova, 2013). Finally, Kang and Hustvedt (2014) concluded that consumers' perception of a company's transparency about production and labor conditions and social responsibility influenced consumers' trust and positive attitude and thereby their intentions to purchase and spread positive word-of-mouth about the company and its products.

As can be seen, research in normative ethical marketing were predominantly non-empirical. In addition, no empirical study could be found which specifically addressed the relationship between ethical marketing and consumers' well-being. Therefore, the researcher hypothesizes that consumers' perception of ethical marketing dimensions namely: a) integrity; b) competence; c) respect; d) empathy; and e) transparency influence consumers' well-being:

H6. Consumers' well-being is a function of consumers' perception of ethical marketing dimensions namely: a) integrity; b) competence; c) respect; d) empathy; and e) transparency.

3.3 Influence of consumers' well-being on purchase intention:

Purchase intention can be defined as "the degree to which a person has formulated conscious plans to perform or not to perform some specified future behavior" (Warshaw and

Davis, 1985, p. 214). Scholars postulated that consumers' well-being reflects their positive experience with a brand and positively influences revisit intentions (e.g. Jones and Sasser, 1995; Grzeskowiak and Sirgy, 2007). Thus, consumers' well-being plays a significant role in company's success. Dagger and Sweeney (2006) studied the relationships between service quality, service satisfaction, quality of life, and behavioral intentions in oncology clinics. They found that service quality and service satisfaction significantly enhanced consumers' quality of life and behavioral intentions. Further, Kim, Jeon and Hyun (2012) results demonstrated that consumers' well-being was a strong psychological motivator for patrons' to revisit and remain loyal to a particular chain restaurant. Moreover, Hwang and Lyn (2015) examined the antecedents and consequences of tourists' well-being utilizing data collected from 230 golf tournament tourists. The results showed that tourists' well-being positively influenced revisit intentions.

Although previous studies have asserted that consumers are likely to have strong behavioral intentions when their quality of life is enhanced, few studies have examined the influence of consumers' well-being on their purchase intentions. Therefore, the researcher hypothesizes that consumers' well-being influences their purchase intention:

H7. Purchase intention is a function of well-being.

4. Conclusion:

The objective of this paper was to shed some light on consumers' perception of ethical marketing by hypothesizing its relationship with materialism, consumers' well-being, and purchase intention. An extensive literature review helps develop a conceptual framework that links materialism three facets defined as: acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness, and possession-defined success to perceived ethical marketing. Further, perceived ethical marketing is hypothesized to positively influence consumers' well-being and purchase intention. Moreover, the model proposes that consumers' well-being plays an important role in the formation of their purchase intention. The following reflects some thoughts about future research suggestions.

Future studies on the subject could develop a reliable and valid measure of ethical marketing. The various conceptual dimensions of consumers' perception of ethical marketing were articulated in this study (i.e. integrity, competence, respect, empathy, and transparency). The proposed components could be used to classify marketers according to their beliefs about

virtuous qualities rather than according to their reports about the criteria they use to make ethical decisions or the ethicality of those decisions (Shanahan and Hyman, 2003). Research on ethical marketing as perceived by consumers is still in the beginning and has not explored all the possible drivers and outcomes. Therefore, future empirical studies could explore other antecedents and outcomes of perceived ethical marketing.

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