

Good Intentions – Thoughtless Buying Decisions: Understanding and Breaking Barriers to Ethical Consumption

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KEYWORDS

Ethical Products, Ethical Consumption, Fair Labor, Sustainability, Ethical Consumerism, Corporate Social Responsibility

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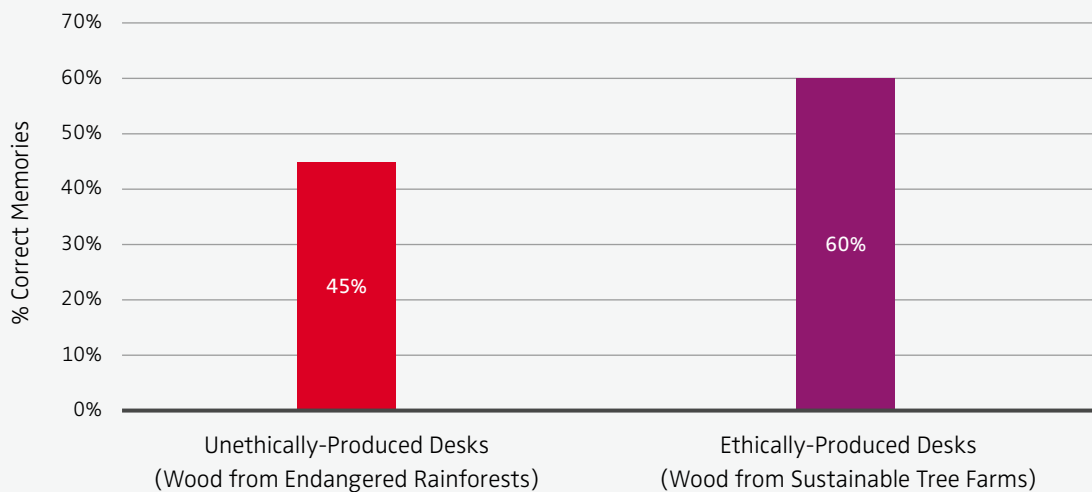
Consumers' purchases often conflict with their ethical values

✗ Consumers generally don't want to harm others or the environment through their purchases. It would make sense, then, that their shopping behavior should reflect these values. For example, if they like the idea of good labor practices, they should purchase jeans made solely by adult workers paid fair wages. If they desire to reduce environmental waste, they should seek out a backpack made with recycled materials. In reality, actual consumer choices often do not reflect their values. Our research has illuminated some psychological barriers that can stop even well-intentioned consumers from making ethical consumption choices.

Reasons for ethically inconsistent purchase decisions

✗ When shopping for fun products like jeans, few people take a moment to think about troublesome issues such as children being exploited in factories. Thus, there is an inherent barrier to getting consumers to consider product ethicality. Unfortunately, it is often easy enough to avoid information about ethically-charged, and less pleasant, product features because the information is not readily available. Although it is usually very easy to find facts about non-ethical product attributes such as price, information on a product's ethicality can be tougher to locate. Shoppers often need to purposefully seek out relevant clues, such as by finding a report about a company's ethics. Sometimes it might just be emotionally easier to not seek the information out, even if they might care about it. Consumers use the following coping strategies to maintain a good mood and avoid the emotional difficulty of thinking about ideas such as labor mistreatment or environmental problems.

FIGURE 1 > Memory for product ethicality 15 minutes after exposure to the information



(All respondents correctly memorized the information initially.)

- > **Willful ignorance** ✕ Early research in this area showed that consumers often choose to remain willfully ignorant about whether a product has been produced ethically. Consumers might remain ignorant simply because they do not care about ethical issues, but willful ignorance does not reflect a lack of interest. Remarkably, consumers who care the most about an ethical issue are especially likely to avoid relevant information because they have the hardest time coping after learning about unethical aspects of a product's creation. Also, if consumers are provided with the same ethical information they previously avoided, they often use it in their decision making.
- > **Motivated forgetting** ✕ Willful ignorance seems easily solved: just present consumers with easily assessable ethical information. Unfortunately, the time at which the information is provided is critical. If it is provided too far in advance of the point-of-purchase, consumers tend to forget which products are ethical. If consumers encounter ethical product information too early, they engage in motivated forgetting, misremembering information about unethical aspects of a product at a much higher rate than other types of product information. For example,

in one study, 236 undergraduates correctly memorized information about which of six desk brands were ethically made using sustainably sourced wood and which were unethically made using wood from endangered rainforests. However, only 15 minutes later, they misremembered information about the unethically-produced desks at a significantly higher rate than the ethically-produced desks. They mistook them to be ethically-produced or did not remember where the wood came from at all. People simply forget that a product was made unethically as a coping mechanism to avoid conflicting feelings they would experience if they contemplated buying such a product (Figure 1).

- > **Disparaging people who make ethical purchase decisions** ✕ In addition to not seeking ethical information and misremembering it, consumers also negatively judge others who do not remain willfully ignorant. This denigration of more ethical customers occurs because an individual's sense of being a good person is often central to their identity. When a consumer perceives a threat to their own ethicality, they lash out at the source of that threat as a way to recover from it and protect themselves.



An especially concerning finding from our studies is that, after denigrating a more ethical shopper, consumers were less concerned about the ethical issue in question and less likely to take future action in support of it. Specifically, consumers who had denigrated another consumer for choosing to find out which of a set of backpack brands were made with recycled material subsequently reported caring less about the environment and expressed less willingness to sign a “Think Green” pledge. More detailed findings of this study are reported in Box 1 and Figure 2.

How to encourage consumers to listen to the better angels of their nature ✕ Consumers seem remarkably adept at avoiding the negative feelings that thinking about ethical issues can produce. We suspect that they are not necessarily exhibiting these coping strategies on purpose and may not be able to control them. Unfortunately, these coping

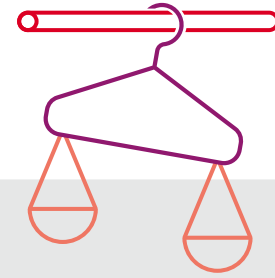
mechanisms can not only affect the immediate purchase but also initiate a cascade of disheartening downstream effects, including negatively impacting their own perceptions of how much they care about the ethical issues and their judgments of others. So how can companies act against these undesirable short- and long-term effects of consumers’ coping strategies?

> **Provide information about ethical product aspects when consumers make their purchase decision** ✕ We believe the best way to encourage consumers to act in line with their ethical beliefs is to provide ethical attribute information at the point-of-purchase. Providing this information reduces the need for consumers to search for or remember facts about potentially problematic aspects of the product, reducing the possibility of avoidance behaviors. This practice would also reduce consumers’ potential

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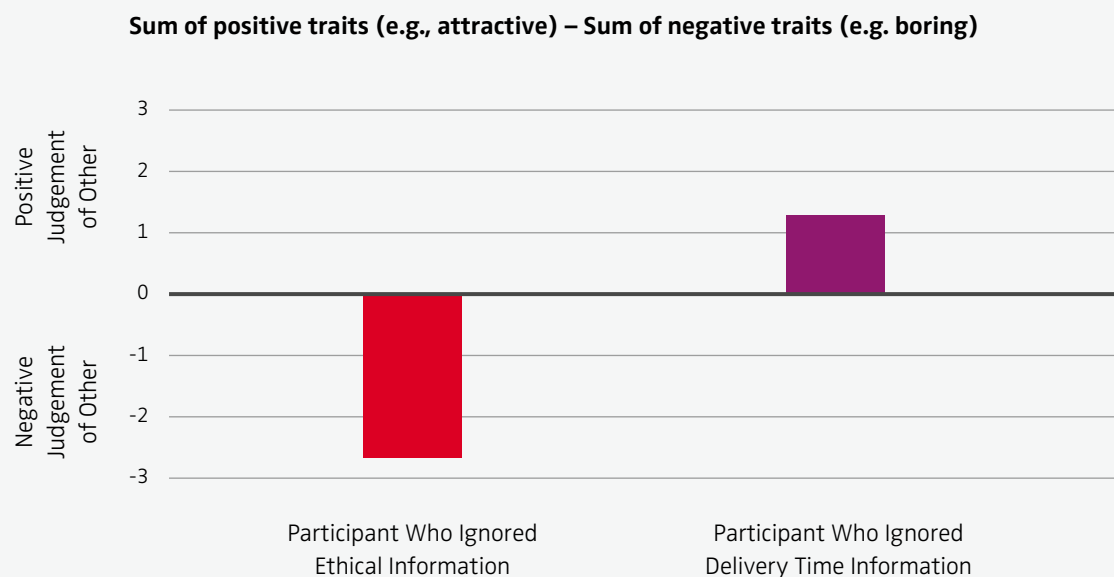
BOX 1

A study of how consumers judge more ethical consumers

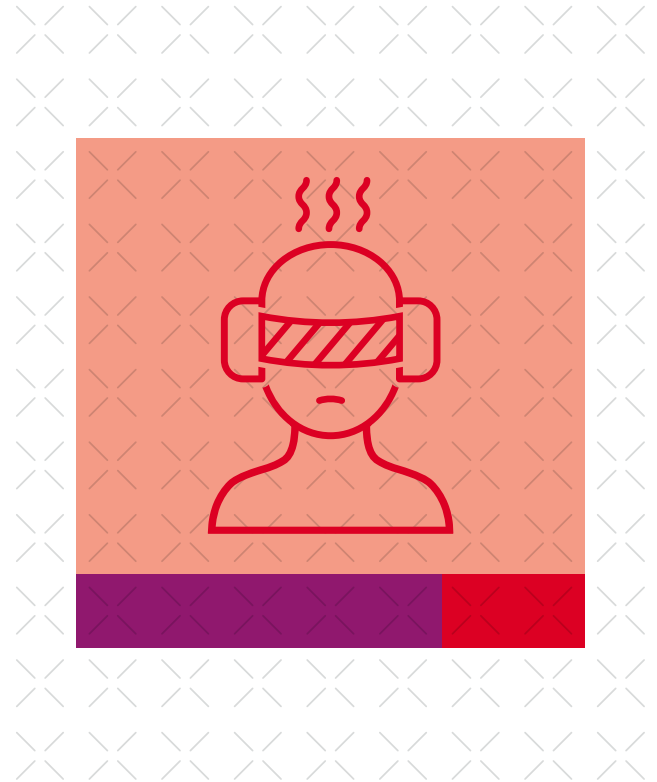
To understand how consumers judge more ethical consumers, we conducted a study in which 147 undergraduates first chose what information they wanted to learn about several pairs of jeans. They were told that, due to time limitations, they could only select two of the available four product attributes to learn about the four brand options. Three of the attributes – style, wash, and price – were the same for all participants and had no tie to ethicality. However, for half of the participants, the fourth attribute was whether the company used child labor. For the other half, who comprised the control condition, the fourth attribute was the product's delivery time, which has less direct ethical implications. Consistent with the willful ignorance effect described above, the majority of participants in the child labor information condition chose not to look at that attribute.

However, our key research question in this project was whether participants who had simply avoided ethical information would denigrate other consumers who had considered ethicality during their choice. To test this possibility, we had all participants provide their opinions about another consumer, ostensibly for market segmentation purposes. If participants had first ignored the labor information, they rated a consumer who did look at this information extremely negatively on a variety of traits, deeming them boring, unfashionable, and even unsexy. If participants had ignored delivery time, though, they did not rate a consumer who paid attention to this non-ethical attribute negatively. In fact, they held positive views of them. Figure 2 shows this effect using the sum of the positive traits (e.g., attractive and sexy) minus the sum of the negative traits (e.g., boring and odd).

FIGURE 2 > How consumers rate other consumers who chose to consider ethical information when they themselves didn't



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to denigrate others who make ethical choices, because it would boost the number of consumers who take ethicality into account when making a purchase in the first place.

- > **Reduce consumers' effort to collect ethicality-related information** ✕ Although many solutions currently exist to give consumers the power to gather ethical information themselves, they all require a certain degree of effort, which all but the most dedicated consumers may not be willing to expend. Instead, information about product ethicality ideally should be directly served to shoppers in a relatively standardized format, potentially either via industry self-regulation or mandated policy. The implementation of this practice is obviously complicated and may carry political weight. However, until consumers see and understand information that is easy to spot about product ethicality at point-of-purchase, the barriers our research has identified will continue to prevent well-meaning consumers from expressing their moral values via their purchases.
- > **Refrain from comparing more and less ethical consumers** ✕ Finally, companies producing ethical products also must take steps to ensure their marketing messages do not portray their current customers as more ethical than other consumers. Comparative messaging might lead potential customers to denigrate these existing customers and ultimately distance themselves from the brand, and, worse, from the ethical cause itself.

Summing up, the timing and availability of ethical information are crucial to prevent a vicious cycle. Easily accessible information presented right when consumers are making their purchasing decision should help shoppers express their ethical values in what they buy. If they make ethical decisions themselves, they should feel less compelled to think negatively of other ethical consumers, which should encourage them to continue being ethical consumers in the future. ✕



FURTHER READING

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