

Why don't consumers consume ethically?

Giana M. Eckhardt^{1*}, Russell Belk^{2†} and Timothy M. Devinney^{3‡}

¹Sawyer Business School, Suffolk University, 8 Ashburton Pl., Boston, MA 02108, USA

²Schulich School of Business, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

³School of Marketing, University of Technology Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia

- *Many consumers profess to want to avoid unethical offerings in the marketplace yet few act on this inclination. This study investigates the nature of the rationales and justifications used by consumers to make sense of this discrepancy. The data was collected via in-depth interviews across eight countries. The respondents were presented with three ethical consumption scenarios, and discussed their views on the consumption issues as well as their consumption behavior. The majority of the discussion focused around their rationalizations for their lack of ethical consumption patterns. Three justification strategies emerged from the data: economical rationalization, institutional dependency, and developmental realism. Economic rationalization focuses on consumers wanting to get the most value for their money, regardless of their ethical beliefs. Institutional dependency refers to the belief that institutions such as the government are responsible to ethically regulate what products can be sold. Finally, developmental realism features the rationalization that some unethical behaviors on the part of corporations must exist in order for macro level economic development to occur. Consumer resistance in the marketplace is currently limited to small niche groups. This study investigates why resistance is so limited, in spite of survey results which suggest that a much larger group of people are interested in ethical consumption. This is the first study to investigate the nature of consumer rationales, and reinforces the need for non-survey-based research to understand nuanced consumer reactions and behaviors in ethical consumerism.*

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Introduction

Although there is considerable buzz around the concept of ethical consumption, the reality

of actual ethical consumption behavior is disheartening at best. For example, the market share held by green products is abysmally low, particularly when taken in comparison to surveys that track consumers' intention to purchase green products (Devinney, 2010). How can we understand this disparity? Peattie and Peattie (2009) point out that in discussions of green marketing an overly rational point of

*Correspondence to: Giana M. Eckhardt, Associate Professor of Marketing, Sawyer Business School, Suffolk University, 8 Ashburton Pl., Boston, MA 02108, USA.
E-mail: geckhardt@suffolk.edu

†The Kraft Foods Canada Chair in Marketing.

‡Professor of Strategy.

view has been taken at the expense of understanding the emotional, symbolic, and cultural meanings that various sustainable consumption behaviors can have. Additionally, Kozinets *et al.* (2010) have pointed out that what is generally considered to be ethical consumer behavior is in flux – is it really good to boycott goods from China to protest unethical employment practices when that may result in fewer jobs for Chinese workers who have no employment alternative? Izberk-Bilgin (2010) makes the point that if you look at the marketplace from the perspective of scholars such as Marx or Baudrillard, although consumers may say they have ambitions to change the marketplace through their behaviors, they are ultimately blinded by the seduction of consumer goods. What this points to is that green consumers (Devinney, 2010) and ethical consumers (Devinney *et al.*, 2010) are both myths.

Although consumers depict themselves as “all caring” in surveys, they continue to ignore social issues as they repeat their traditional product preferences and purchases in the marketplace (Devinney *et al.*, 2006). This leads to a significantly lower degree of socially responsible consumption than would be expected based upon survey data (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Cotte, 2009). This is part of the widely acknowledged gap between expressed attitudes, intentions, and behavior (e.g., Belk, 1985). This problem is exacerbated when the focus is on a socially desirable behavior like ethical consumption, because people are loathe to admit that they do not care about the issues that others think they should care about (Ulrich and Sarasin, 1995). This has led a number of researchers of ethical consumption to try to improve upon predictions using more complex attitude models such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (e.g., Ozcaglar-Toulouse *et al.*, 2006). However, although the Theory of Planned Behavior is designed to provide better predictions of reasoned actions (Newholm and Shaw, 2005), Belk *et al.* (1998) argue that such reasoned behavior models are wholly inappropriate for emotional consumer choices of the sort

involved in much ethical consumption. Instead, along with others (e.g., Cherrier, 2005), they advocate an interpretive approach as a more fruitful methodology for studying consumer ethical behavior.

In order to make sense of the disparity between the expressed desire to avoid products and brands perceived to be unethical, and many consumers' actual behavior, we used an interpretive approach. Although Belk *et al.* (2005) initially documented these inconsistencies, in this study we go further by examining the varying rationales used by consumers to justify these contradictions among consumers from eight disparate countries. This allows us to see how consumer resistance is informed and shaped by economic and cultural globalization, which has been suggested by Izberk-Bilgin (2010) to be one of the most immediate gaps in anti-consumption research. Our goal is to understand at a deeper level how sustainable consumption behavior – not attitudes – can be cultivated.

The nature of justifications and excuses

To do this, we need a lens with which to view the inconsistencies. Consumer ethics should involve not only core values about social justice, morality, and just behavior, they should also be relatively easy to act upon given the choices available in the marketplace that align with ethical stances. Even consumers without strong ethical convictions would like to think of themselves as good people, so doing the “right” thing in their consumption choices should be appealing.

However, doing the right thing may mean paying more, expending more time and effort to find the “right” product, or doing without a popular brand. Therefore, consumers may choose to remain consciously or subconsciously ignorant of the labor conditions, environmental impacts, or intellectual property rights issues involved in the products they buy. They can also invoke a series of accounts – justifications or excuses (Scott and Lyman, 1968) – in order to continue to think of

themselves as good people, despite engaging in ostensibly unethical consumption behavior. A justification is an account that takes responsibility for the unethical act but attempts to make it seem ethical. An excuse denies full responsibility for the action.

Prior research suggests that consumers quite easily disconnect their attitudes and behaviors (Carrigan and Attala, 2001). For example, when examining prostitute patronage in an AIDS-ravaged region of Northern Thailand, young Thai men were quite aware of the risks as well as precautionary safeguards (Belk *et al.*, 1998). In fact, before patronizing local brothels these men often bought alcohol and condoms with the intention of using both. Inevitably they used the alcohol first and then forgot about the condoms. The alcohol provided a convenient excuse when they claimed in the morning that they were drunk and therefore could not be held responsible for their having unprotected sex.

The particular accounts people use are likely to vary culturally. For example, when examining materialism in four different cultural contexts, in each case informants said that they regarded materialism as selfish, unsatisfying, and shallow (Ger and Belk, 1999). Nevertheless, virtually all informants said they wished they had a nicer house, a fancy car, more money, and various consumer goods they could not currently afford. In justifying or excusing this apparent inconsistency, Americans tended to say that they deserved nice things because they worked hard for their money. Romanians justified this based on their relative deprivation in the world after years of communism under Nicolai Ceauçescu. Turks excused their materialistic ambitions by claiming that the desired consumption items were not for them but for their families. And Western Europeans justified their behavior by observing that it was really the Americans who were the crass materialists, and that Europeans knew how to spend their money on good food, good travel, good music, and so forth.

Tilly (2006) outlines a typology of four types of accounts typically given to rationalize

behavior. These are conventions, stories, codes, and technical accounts. *Conventions* are broadly accepted reasons for deviant behavior, such as my train was late or I have a conflicting engagement. *Stories* are explanatory narratives incorporating cause-effect accounts of unfamiliar phenomena, such as winning a big prize or meeting a high school classmate at Egypt's Pyramids 20 years after graduation. *Codes* need not bear much explanatory weight so long as they conform to available rules, such as religious prescriptions or law codes. Finally, *technical accounts* are explanations of events which claim to identify reliable connections of cause and effect grounded in a systematic, specialized discipline. Notably, none of these types of reasons have much to do with the actual causes of behavior. Tilly (2006) ultimately concludes that no matter which type of reasoning is used, people want their explanations packaged in familiar tropes, or what he calls superior stories. Superior stories simplify cause and effect, deal with a limited number of actors and actions, and omit or minimize errors. Superior stories can take the form of any of the above reasoning strategies.

In this study, we seek to access the justifications and rationales consumers use to reconcile the inconsistencies between professed beliefs and actions. This approach detects the meanings that consumers offer to make sense of the inconsistency between their *beliefs* and *intentions to act* on one hand and their discrepant *behaviors* on the other.

Methodology

We investigated consumer ethics from the consumer's emic perspective. Qualitative and interpretive methods can add considerable depth to understanding how consumers behave in manners they regard as responsible, how they account for behaviors that are inconsistent with their avowed beliefs, and what they know or think they know about the underlying issues (Cherrier, 2005).

We conducted approximately hour-long depth interviews with 20 consumers in each

of eight countries: Australia, China, Germany, India, Spain, Turkey, Sweden, and the United States. During these interviews, informants were presented with three scenarios, addressing qualitatively different consumer ethics situations. One scenario involved purchasing counterfeit products, one involved purchasing a popular athletic shoe manufactured under conditions of worker exploitation, and the final scenario involved buying a product that is potentially harmful to the environment or that uses animal by-products and animal testing (see Belk *et al.*, 2005).

The questions asked of the participants after they read each scenario began in a projective manner, asking what most of those in their society might do in each circumstance. We then focused more specific queries into their own beliefs and behaviors. The use of projective techniques is regarded as especially useful when dealing with sensitive subject matter and topics that might lead to socially desirable but inaccurate answers in more direct questioning (Belk *et al.*, 2003).

Two versions of each scenario were created. Manipulations in the scenarios involved: (1) the type of ethical breach - environmental or animal related, (2) male or female worker-related, and (3) trademark infringement on either a big ticket or small ticket item. The combination of the 2nd and 3rd scenarios contrasted the country of origin of the corporations involved - First or Third World. One version of each scenario was shown to an informant, with the version systematically rotated over informants; that is, manipulations were partly within subjects and partly across subjects. This enabled us to see how these various types of ethical evaluations were interpreted both by the same respondent as well as by informants in various different cultures. All responses were audio and video recorded in digital video format in the native language and dialect of each locale, and later translated into English for analysis.

Participants in each country were high school graduates ranging in age from 20 to 60, with an equal proportion of men and women. Informants were from major urban

Table 1. Respondent city profiles

Country	Cities used within country
Australia	Sydney
China	Beijing and Shanghai
Germany	Hamburg
India	Mumbai and Hyderabad
Spain	Madrid
Sweden	Göteborg
Turkey	Istanbul and Ankara
USA	Salt Lake City

Note: In countries with two cities, each city had 10 respondents each. In countries with one city, all 20 respondents came from that city.

areas in each country, with the samples generally reflecting the ethnicity and religions of the nation as well as varying socioeconomic levels. (See **Table 1** for a listing of the respondent's locales.) After discussing "grand tour" questions with the researcher, informants were presented with the three scenarios, one at a time. The order of the scenarios presented was rotated within each group of 20.

The analysis of the transcripts and videos was qualitative and hermeneutic (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson *et al.*, 1994; Thompson, 1997). All of the authors participated in the interpretive process, first individually and then in unison in order to leverage our own differing cultural and individual differences (Belk *et al.*, 2003).

The nature of ethical superior stories

Most of our informants did not care about the issues presented to them. Some professed to care, but when they described their actual purchasing behavior they revealed a disconnect between their beliefs and behavior. In all cases, they offered justifications or excuses for the apparent inconsistency between their beliefs and behaviors. They used three types of rationales to explain these inconsistencies: (1) economic rationalism, (2) governmental dependency, and (3) developmental realism.

In all three strategies, participants created superior stories which utilized conventions, stories, codes, and sometimes technical accounts (Tilly, 2006).

Economic rationalization

The first of the justification strategies used was economic rationalization. In this case consumers justified their behavior using rational arguments that focus on personal consumer utility. This justification was especially common among Americans and Australians and to some degree amongst Spaniards.

The economic rationalist justifications included citations of cost as more important than any other consideration. For example, in providing a justification for his lack of concern about testing soap on animals, an Australian participant espoused the utilitarian view that if the benefits to him personally outweigh the costs, then his behavior is OK. He assessed the benefits of an ecologically sound soap in an overtly economic rationalist way: he would not pay more than 10 per cent more for something that was biodegradable.

Of the three scenarios, our interviewees were least concerned about purchasing counterfeit goods; something most people consider "victimless" (e.g., Perez *et al.*, 2010). The most common account used with this position was that it simply presented no ethical conflict. We can again see economic rationality evidenced in these justifications. As one American said, "It's a waste of money, but no one's hurt; you get what you pay for; smart consumer." According to others, "It's a good deal, the consumer isn't being fooled" and "[counterfeits] are a bargain." One American participant did an implicit cost benefit analysis and said, in discussing whether he would buy counterfeit products or not, "I'd only worry that the quality might not be good, or with pirated software that there might be a glitch."

An Australian respondent said, "If quality was an issue I would purchase the original but if that was not the case the fake might be

good enough." One Australian male suggested that the price of the original Louis Vuitton bag is too high based on the cost of the materials, and thus from an economic perspective it is rational to buy the fake. Similarly, as another argued, "Fakes are not the same quality but price makes up for that," echoing the cost-benefit analysis mentality.

This type of rationale was also exhibited in the context of sweatshop labor/Nike sneakers. For example, an Australian informant, in discussing how factories operating under sweatshop conditions can be economically beneficial to the country in which it is located, said,

Part of this is a development issue. Years ago it was Japan, then Singapore and Malaysia. Now it is Vietnam and China. These countries need opportunities.

One particularly rational Spanish woman suggested that we cannot ask corporations to behave in ways that we ourselves do not:

Aren't we exploiting ourselves when we use cheap labor from migrants? If I have a cleaner to clean my place, I wouldn't get a Spanish cleaner because I have to pay her 12 Euros an hour, I get a Romanian one and I pay her 6 Euros an hour. It's the same thing.

Similarly many Australian informants considered these circumstances as, "part of a process" where "unfortunately such conditions appear to be necessary." One Australian was more blunt:

Most Australians are concerned about price, not the labor issues. Morals stop at the pocket book. People might say something, but if they were to make them [athletic shoes] in Australia at twice the price, people would buy the foreign cheaper brand. These blokes [factory workers in Southeast Asia] are lucky to have a job. If they weren't making them there these people would not have work.

You would not want to upset the labor conditions in these countries [by paying them more]. The advantages to these people outweigh the costs.

Finally, another Australian informant said, "I might consider a local brand not using bad labor practices but it would have to be competitive in terms of all other factors."

These participants create rationales in the frame of superior stories through a lens of economic rationality. In doing so, they invoke conventions more than codes or technical accounts.

Institutional dependency

Other justifications that consumers offer for inconsistencies in their ethical beliefs and behavior focus on their lack of individual responsibility for the issues presented to them. They instead offer that it is the responsibility of various institutions to only allow ethical consumer choices. They feel that legislation and laws are the way to fix things, and thus it is the role of politicians to debate and decide on ethical consumerist policies. If something is legally available to them, consumers feel it must be okay to buy it, since the government has sanctioned its sale. For example, a Swedish informant said, in relation to the issue of soap being biodegradable, "the government should protect the environment." Similarly another Swede said, "Now we're part of Europe, so it's Europe's responsibility." This reliance on legal codes in creating justificatory stories was especially common in the social democracies of Sweden and Germany.

What was surprising was that institutions other than the government or NGOs were held responsible in these institutional dependency stories. For example, many people considered advertisers and corporations as key "institutions". One Swede expected that "advertising should let us know about this," while another noted that "in Germany there is a duck on packages to mark "green" products," suggesting that the Swedish government

should require something similar to make consumers aware of the issue.

In response to buying counterfeit goods, one Swede expressed a commonly held belief that "if it's legal people should buy it, but if it is illegal, they shouldn't." He equated the ethics of consumerism to the laws enacted by government; if the government has decided that a particular product can be legally sold in the country, then the consumer does not have a responsibility to question that ruling. Similarly, another Swede felt that "copyright infringement is a crime that should be stopped legally, not by consumer boycott." That is, the government should be taking action, not consumers.

Among many German consumers, this lack of individual responsibility was revealed in what we call a traditionalist manner. That is, these informants felt the expected pattern of government protection absolved them of responsibility. They asked why they should waste time thinking about such issues or changing their consumption patterns. For example, one German said that the situations presented in the scenarios are "just the way things are." Another said, "I cannot do anything about it, so why bother thinking about it." Another expressed this logic with a fairly typical, "don't talk about things that don't concern you and you can do nothing about." Here we see that because it is seen to be up to someone else besides the individual consumer to address these issues, the question then becomes why should anyone think, talk or act about the issues at all? Although Germany and Sweden are seen as green countries politically, there is a distinct lack of personal responsibility regarding consumer ethics in such socialist democracies.

The superior stories created here are filtered through a lens of holding other institutions responsible for addressing both ethical and consumer related issues. Thus, even if they think a particular practice is wrong, they do not see it as their responsibility to address the issue, or even to think about the issue. The code of laws and institutions is invoked to justify their indifference.

Developmental realism

Many of our informants saw breaching their own sense of morality as part of the price to pay for economic growth. These people saw the issues of paying low wages to factory workers and providing bad working conditions, not being environmentally sensitive or animal friendly, and manufacturing and purchasing counterfeit goods, as simply examples of the way the world works during a particular stage of development. This argument was most common in developing economies. For example, in discussing the ethicality of buying soap that is non-biodegradable, our Turkish informants were consistent: *"In Turkey people are too poor to worry about such ethical issues;" "Turkish people are not influenced by ethical concerns, price is more important;"* and, *"...these ethical issues are of no concern to people in the village - they only want a cheap familiar soap that cleans."*

Even though the scenario describing poor working conditions was set in South East Asia, our Turkish informants easily related to the situation. For example, as one explained,

"Turkish people are much less sensitive considering the ethical values brought up in this scenario. These issues would get much more reaction in the developed Western countries. Questions like the oppression of workers and female workers who are required to work longer hours for substandard wages are less sensitive for Turkish people compared to Western countries."

Most of our Chinese informants considered the labor condition scenario to lack any ethical issue. They thought the pay was normal for the local area, and should not be compared to wages in other countries. Some of them also used their knowledge of how capitalism works to justify their lack of concern:

"We should judge by the living level and its coverage salary in Jiangsu [a city in China

which has a Nike factory], you should compare with the ordinary family, not Europe or any other place."

This same informant goes on to say, *"Normal, it's absolutely normal. And natural since it's a market economy."* Another Chinese respondent noted that *"To have exploitation of the workers is quite natural; this is the natural adoption of every business throughout the world."* Another offered a similar sentiment, *"The capitalist class is quite oppressing. We learnt it when we were in primary school. We know what the capitalist class is from our politics lessons."* With reference to specifics of Nike, most Chinese were quite direct: *"They are capitalists, so they will pursue high profits."* And it seemed that this realism was not devoid of hard economic rationalism, as expressed by a young Chinese woman who noted that

most people know how Nike shoes are made. It's very normal. Some say it's a good thing. You will be laid-off if you aren't oppressed by others. The boss gives money to you. The boss earns money, and then you have money. No one is hurt. Everyone has won.

Our Indian informants echo this acceptance of labor conditions in similar ways to the Turkish and Chinese. For example, one informant said,

"What can we do? It has nothing to do with us. Some people earn well, some countries are poor. That is business. It's cheap for them [Nike]. If they try to do it in the US, they have to pay more. There is nothing wrong. If they [the workers] had no job, then how would it be? At least they have food to eat."

Another Indian acquiesced to the reality that

Basically, there are few opportunities to work. Therefore, they [the workers] are satisfied with whatever work they get.

Something is better than nothing. Manufacturers take this as an opportunity to give them low wages. In this way, both manufacturers and labor benefit.

Some justifications surrounding why it is acceptable to buy counterfeit products centered on the ethicality of large corporations exploiting the people by charging high prices, especially in Turkey.

Some people see counterfeits as a positive development against the exploitation. I heard about people talking positively about counterfeits. They hold negative attitudes towards America. There may be people even saying "let these brands go belly-up, who cares". That wouldn't affect me so much. I am not bothered as much about Louis Vuitton as about authorized dealers in Turkey. In the end they are giant companies. How much loss would Louis Vuitton suffer? That is, Louis Vuitton would suffer only a small loss in the end. I think nothing would happen to Louis Vuitton [if I buy counterfeit LV products].

Other justifications centered on the right of people in developed countries with superior economic conditions to say that buying a counterfeit is wrong in countries where most people are poor. Chinese consumers also accepted counterfeit goods as a normal part of everyday life. As one explained,

It's acceptable in China, but not abroad. We didn't know about copyright of music products. We thought it was normal to buy fake discs. We got the same result by paying less money. Consumers say it's unacceptable to pay 20 Yuan for a real disc, but rather we pay 1-2 Yuan for a fake. We earn RMB, and American people earn dollars.

Thus, he thinks it is unfair to hold Chinese consumers to the same standards, considering their reduced ability to buy the real thing.

One Chinese woman explained how she feels about fake goods in the marketplace:

In fact it's not good. But real discs are too expensive and worth several fake ones. If it is only one or two Yuan dearer than the fake one, the real one may lose market share. Many people prefer to buy cheaper things instead of the expensive real one. I know it's not ethical. People would buy real discs if they're cheap.

Another offered a similar argument:

In China, most of the consumers are from the ordinary working class. They do not earn much and they have to spend money on life so they will certainly mind the price as the first important thing. That's natural. The mass media say that we should be against pirated editions. But from the economic background of most of the Chinese people, most of them will go to buy the fake things. Why do they support the fake? Just think of the price.

Our Indian informants view counterfeits similarly. As one noted,

How can you talk about ethics when the basic necessities are not met? You need a good bag, ok a good bag is there. You can't afford a real one. And you are taking it. It's like you don't have a choice, to really sit and talk about ethics. You can talk about ethics when you have everything in front of you. When you don't have things and when you are running for things, trying to get things, get a bag, good bag, and all that, get a good life style, you can't, you don't have the choice. You feel like getting the real thing but you can't, so you try to pacify yourself with this [the fake bag].

These consumers create their rationalizing tropes through the lens of their economic situation, political education, and intimate knowledge of the development and labor conditions in their countries. This echoes

Varman and Belk's (2009) findings that anti-consumption movements privilege the local over the global. These stories rely heavily on conventions as well as the relativism of the more versus less affluent world. We can also see a current of resentment to how the media, NGOs, and other consumers from developed countries try and frame the issues in ways so distanced from their reality.

Discussion

We have seen a variety of superior stories (Tilly, 2006) developed by our respondents as they construct justifications for their lack of ethical consumption behaviors. The nature of the rationales suggests that simply making information available to consumers about the ethical nature of their purchases, or even using moral appeals to try and invoke behavior change, will not likely engender anti-consumption of unethical or irresponsible brands. As suggested in the institutional dependence theme, anti-consumption may need to be mandated by institutions such as governments, in which case we can question whether it is anti-consumption or not.

Although the particular justificatory stories told by our informants tended to differ by country, together they suggest a discouraging case for the widespread adoption of ethical consumption. By claiming to merely be acting in a rational economic manner in the most free market economies, by saying it is up to state institutions to take care of such concerns in the social democracies, or by rationalizing that it is the way of the capitalist world in less economically developed countries, most everyone we studied has found a convenient way to justify their unethical behaviors. This is crafted in terms of stories that variously invoke the tropes identified by Tilly (2006). In terms of the accounts identified by Scott and Lyman (1968), both those in the free market economies of the US and Australia and those in the less affluent countries of Turkey, India, and China used justifications to say that what they were doing wasn't really unethical or wasn't

so bad. Those in the social democracies of Sweden, Germany, and to a lesser extent Spain, instead used excuses to say that while what they were doing may be unethical and unfortunate, it was not really their fault. Institutions in society were in place to take care of such things, so it is the institutions that have failed, not them.

This is not to say that none of those studied were really concerned and had changed their behaviors accordingly. But these people were the exception rather than the rule. We may conclude from this that consumer ethics are perhaps best thought of as a luxury. But unlike the Louis Vuitton counterfeit goods in one of our scenarios, the luxury of consumer ethics was not very appealing. The question then becomes how to make such ethical stances more attractive. For some consumers in Sweden and Germany, a heightened ethical concern had been prompted by a television documentary they had seen about the child labor used in making certain carpets from the less affluent world. This suggests that strong emotional appeals rather than rational or moral appeals may have a better chance of making the luxury of consumer ethics more appealing and the case for action more compelling. Lee *et al.* (2009) suggest that scholars need to define whether anti-consumption behavior is proactive or reactive, and whether it is selectively practiced or generally practiced. Our results suggest that it is reactive, and in response to emotional rather than rational stimuli, and also that it is selectively practiced in response to particular, locally relevant, issues. Kozinets *et al.* (2010) posit that consumers may either engage in anti-consumption toward specific issues, or toward a way of life in general. Our results would support the former contention that consumers would be far more likely to engage in behaviors related to specific issues. But the issues must engage them realistically.

Exploration of effective strategies for heightening the urgency of consumer ethical behavior, however, awaits further research. Our findings have highlighted the types of accounts used by consumers to explain the

discrepancy between their beliefs and behaviors, which provides an explanation for disappointing green product market shares, and also points the way toward overcoming the justifications and rationales offered to justify the status quo. Future research should look into how appeals designed to overcome the economic rationalist, the governmental dependent, and the developmental realist can be implemented.

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Biographical notes

Giana Eckhardt is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Suffolk University. She has published widely on issues related to global consumer culture in outlets such as *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of International Marketing*, and *Journal of Macromarketing*, and has published a book with Cambridge University Press. She is a past co-chair of the Consumer Culture Theory conference, and has guest edited a special issue of *Consumption, Markets and Culture*. Her research has won awards from the Sheth Foundation and the Marketing Science Institute. She has also received research grants from the Australian Research Council and the Marketing Science Institute.

Russell Belk is Kraft Foods Canada Chair in Marketing at the Schulich School of Business at York University. He is past president of the International Association of Marketing and Development, and is a fellow, past president, and Film Festival co-founder in the Association for Consumer Research. He has received the Paul D. Converse Award, the Sheth Foundation/Journal of Consumer Research Award for Long Term Contribution to Consumer Research, two Fulbright Fellowships, and honorary professorships on four continents. He has over 475 publications and his research

involves the meanings of possessions, collecting, gift-giving, materialism, and global consumer culture. His work is often cultural, visual, and interpretive.

Timothy Devinney (BSc CMU; MA, MBA, PhD Chicago) is Professor of Strategy at the University of Technology, Sydney. He has published six books and more than ninety articles in leading journals including *Management Science*, *The Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Organization Science*, *California Management Review*, and the *Strategic Management Journal*. He is a fellow of the Academy of International Business, a recipient of an Alexander von Humboldt Research Award and a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Fellow.

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