Editorial

Studying the ethical consumer: A review of research

Studying the ethics of consumption

We suggest several interlinked areas of study have, to very different extents, developed to address the general area of the ethics of consumption:

- Consumer ethics mostly in relation to ‘shopping misbehaviour’ were reviewed by Vitell (2003) and have generated a considerable range of cross-cultural comparisons.
- Consumer resistance to marketing efforts (Holt, 1997; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004).
- Consumption morality and the issue of sustainability interlinked with a proliferation of individual and semi-organised projects such as downshifting, voluntary simplicity and slow food (Parkins and Craig, 2006; Schor, 1985, 1998).
- Corporate, collective and social entrepreneurial efforts in relation to creating ethical consumption opportunities and spaces (Crane, 2005).
- The expert academic perspectives on the ethics of consumption (Crocker and Linden, 1998).
- Ethical consumption as a conscious project of individuals and small groups (Harrison et al., 2005).

Although the focus of this special issue is on ethical consumption as an individual or semi-organised project, there are no clear boundaries between these areas. Additionally, ethical consumption remains an under-examined aspect of consumer behaviour. As such, therefore, we will draw briefly on these other areas of study and other disciplines and in particular geography, sociology and psychology. In doing so we will discuss the various themes that have developed within the study of ethical consumption and then introduce, and locate, the papers in this special issue.

The ‘rise’ of ethical consumption

While notions of consumption choice as market politics can be traced back at least to the early 20th century (Fetter [1907], cited in
Dickinson and Carsky, 2005: 25), the reasons for the apparent rise of ‘ethical consumption’ during the last quarter of the 20th century have attracted academic interest (e.g. Harrison et al., 2005). In seeking to understand the growing interest in ethical consumer concern, some commentators have cited the ‘increased media coverage’ (Roberts, 1996: 79; Strong, 1996), increased levels of information (Smith, 1995; Strong, 1996; Berry and McEachern, 2005) and the greater availability of ‘alternative’ products (Strong, 1996) as possible reasons.

Other academics have been interested in the changed conditions of consumption. Borgmann (2000) argues, for example that our paradigm of consumption is characterised by being disassociated from production, products requiring little effort in use and the promise of pure pleasure is unencumbered by ‘reality’. Yet as Heiskanen and Pantzar (1997) have convincingly argued there is a tendency to become locked into these evolving consumption systems. In mostly affluent societies, freed from basic needs, consumers, it has been argued (Hansen and Schrader, 1997; Dickinson and Carsky, 2005), become responsible for their behaviour. It is consistent with this view that Brooker (1976), drawing on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, found that consumers adopting socially conscious consumer behaviour scored high on ‘self-actualisation’ (see also Etzioni, 2004).

In a similar way, both Parkins and Craig (2006) and Harrison et al. (2005) have referred to Beck’s (1992) concept of ‘risk society’ to explain in part the apparent ‘rise’ of ethical consumption. Drawing on the notion of risk, it is observed that in an individualised culture we increasingly face the consequences of our consumer choices without the benefit of traditions to guide us. As Barnett et al. (2005c: 23) express this, commodity consumption has been ‘problematised’ such that ‘ethical consumption […] involves both a governing of consumption and a governing of the consuming self’. Parkins and Craig (2006: 7) deliberately offer a more positive spin by arguing, ‘Everyday life […] has a creative and ethical potential; and […] it must be reflexively negotiated and managed by contemporary subjects’. Similarly, both Ger (1997) and Borgmann (2000) emphasise the importance of reenergising the ‘positive’ or ‘focal’ experiences of consumption. From this perspective, ethical consumption is located in, and an inevitable consequence of, our consumer culture.

**How many, how much: marketing to ethical and green consumers by segmenting the market**

Attempts in the 1970s to profile the American ‘socially conscious consumer’ were reported as being inconclusive (Webster, 1975). The first commercial market research into green consumerism in the UK appeared in the 1980s. Under the title, ‘The Green Consumer: Green Today: Ethical Tomorrow’, Mintel (1994)
reported a significant willingness among consumers to be affected in their buying patterns by a wide range of ethical issues. These issues included oppressive regimes, human rights, labour relations, land rights, the environment, irresponsible marketing, fair trade, nuclear power, armaments, animal testing, factory farming and political donations. At this early stage marketing interests were conventional and were concerned primarily with the proportion of the consumer population exhibiting ethical attitudes (Lloyd, 1992; MORI, 1994). Marketers were also interested to see whether the phenomenon was a fad destined to decline during downturns in the economy.

Conventional marketing concerns have continued. For example, Diamantopoulos et al. (2003) sought to profile green consumers in respect of socio-demographics and researchers have asked if consumers will pay a premium for social product features (Auger et al., 2003; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005a).

Of the US market, Roberts (1996: 79 emphasis added) says ‘Increasing levels of environmental concern and social consciousness make it likely that both the size and profile of the socially responsible market segments have changed dramatically from earlier research attempts’. From a managerial perspective, therefore, ethical consumers tend to be conceived in terms of niche size (see e.g. Langeland, 1998; Dickson, 2001) and an ‘opportunity to develop [a retailer’s] profile in terms of corporate social responsibility [and] also a chance to develop a competitive advantage in a new niche market’ (Nicholls, 2002: 6 emphasis added). In this context much more research has been carried out in order for marketers to delineate the ethical consumer than for ethical concerns and aspirations to be understood (Newholm, 2000; Crane, 2005).

It is perhaps not surprising that marketing managers now perceive early ‘green products’ as not well received by consumers (Peattie, 1999; Crane, 2000). It might be argued that, since these forays into the ethical market, producers and retailers have been more cautious as to what they present to the consumer and that subsequent approaches have been more sophisticated, some even including collaboration with the consumer (Crane, 2000).

Rather than conceiving ethical consumers as a niche to be catered for by shelf space in the supermarket, a number of researchers have pointed to the ‘heterogeneity’ (Roberts, 1996; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006) or complexity of consumers’ ethical decisions (Marks and Mayo, 1991; Shaw and Newholm, 2002) and ‘projects’ (Newholm, 2005). Such complexity requires understanding and we consider this in more detail in the next section.

**Decision-making, information, complexity and the moral self**

Although not specifically aimed at understanding ethical consumption as a project, the Hunt-Vitell model (Vitell et al., 2001)
assumes a rational consumer employing a deontological and/or teleological evaluation of a clearly defined ethical problem. Some more recent work has suggested that a consumer’s approach to ethical issues is part of their ‘moral self-realisation’ (Kozinets and Handlman, 1998), where green and ethical consumers are ‘obtaining a part of their identity through their consumption’ (Langeland, 1998). Occasionally this is an ‘oppositional’ (Thompson and Arsel, 2004) or a changed identity (Cherrier, 2005). Since such identity concerns a consumer’s virtue (Barnett et al., 2005a), ethical consumption is not best understood just as a rational calculation. Nevertheless, ‘processes on self-actualisation are determined increasingly by individual decisions about employment and labour, as well as consumption and leisure’ (Parkins and Craig, 2006: 13). Thus, whilst one school of research has sought to model ethical consumer decision-making, another has sought to understand the construction of consumer identity from the discourses of ethical consumption. We look at these in turn.

The notion of a rational consumer is apparent in Strong’s (1996) assertion that information is the key to ethical consumption. ‘The increasingly well-informed consumer is not only demanding fairly traded products, but is challenging manufacturers and retailers to guarantee the ethical claims they are making about their products’. (Strong, 1996: 5 emphasis added). Similarly, the importance of information, about company practices, in consumers’ decision-making has been the subject of research (Griffin et al., 1991; Creyer, 1997; Folkes and Kamins, 1999). However, Pearce (1999) notes that in consumption situations there is an information asymmetry. To the extent that we see information as crucial to a good decision, ethical consumers are at a disadvantage and the market cannot, Pearce argues, function according to the perfect ‘laissez faire model’.

Concepts of the consumer as rational allow decision-making models to be proposed, studied and refined. Consumers perceive needs, gather information, set this within their attitudes and their perception of the social context and develop behavioural intentions. In this way primary causes of attitude changes and consumer behaviour can be studied.

Attitude is central to theories of consumer decision-making particularly in relation to attempts to bridge the so-called attitude-behaviour gap. It is not surprising, therefore, to find research seeking to model ethical consumer decision-making which attempts to build on existing attitude-behaviour theories. Exploring pro-ecological attitudes and behaviours Ellen (1994) examined the relationship between these dimensions and objective and subjective knowledge. Ellen (1994) raised concerns that consumers may not have the knowledge required to make sound ecological decisions and require cooperation from marketers, government and NGOs to support the development of effective consumer labelling and advertising programs. Minton and Rose (1997: 37) examined the
effects of attitude and norms on behaviour and behavioural intention and found that ‘personal norm had a primary influence on the behaviours while the [general environmental] attitude had the primary influence on behavioural intentions’. Follows and Jobber (2000) explored environmentally responsible behaviour in the context of cloth diaper purchasing and found a values-attitudes-intentions-behaviour hierarchical relationship.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) supports the proposition that behavioural intentions are explained by attitudes and subjective norms, while also highlighting the impact of perceived barriers to successfully carrying out a behaviour. The issue of barriers to behaviour was considered important in an ethical context where Shaw and Clarke (1999) found problems of availability, choice and information as obstacles to desired ethical consumer behaviours. A number of studies subsequently adopted the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a framework by which to examine ethical consumer decision-making. The core framework of the theory has been broadened to include additional measures of ‘ethical obligation’ (Sparks et al., 1995; Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006) and ‘self-identity’ (Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006) found to be pertinent in ethical consumption contexts. Elements of the Theory of Planned Behaviour have also been reconceptualised. Nuttin (1987) argued that while intention is undoubtedly an important precursor to action, its meaning and role need to be clarified. Bagozzi (1993) argued strongly that research is needed to understand the intervening processes linking attitudes and behaviour and proposed a theory of volitional processes as the central mediators. In their study exploring intentions to avoid sweatshop clothing, Shaw et al. (2006a) found that in addition to intention, desire and plan are also pertinent precursors to ethically motivated behaviour.

In each of these studies there is a desire to more clearly understand the relationships between attitudes and behaviours. In an ethical context, however, concerned consumers may find themselves confronted by uncertainty in terms of information available to aid decision-making and the consequences of their decisions. Under such circumstances it could be considered hardly surprising that an attitude-behaviour gap has been reported in terms of a weak relationship between what consumers say, and what they do (Burke et al., 1993; Roberts, 1996; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000). Carrigan and Attalla (2001: 560), for example, say ‘although we are more sophisticated as consumers today, this does not necessarily translate into behaviour’. We cannot assume, therefore, that information will lead to action since higher prices and effort will often put would-be consumers off (De Pelsmaker et al., 2005a). At one end of a spectrum of researchers addressing the words/deeds inconsistency, Ulrich and Sarasini (1995) claim that any research asking consumers any question on ethical buying

behaviour will not elicit reliable answers. At the other, narrowing the gap is a matter of refining the models (Follows and Jobber, 2000) or methods (Foxall, 1984).

Newholm (2005: 114) has argued that ‘attitudes cannot be “read off” behaviour or vice versa, not least because of social mediation and the varied meanings associated with particular practices’. Additionally, since consumers seem willing to discuss their ‘inconsistencies’ (Burke et al., 1993), it might alternatively be suggested that a more interpretive approach to an understanding of consumer morality in consumption practice would be appropriate.

Much of the research exploring ethical consumption practices has been carried out in relation to fair trade (Strong, 1996, 1997; Langeland, 1998; Shaw et al., 2000; Nicholls, 2002; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Golding and Peattie, 2005; Low and Davenport, 2005; Fridell, 2006; Hira and Ferrie, 2006; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). In marketing terms this is the most successful and high profile element of ethical consumption. Conversely, Newholm (2005) has argued that from the consumer perspective it is the accumulation of consumption issues, dynamism in the market and complexity of competing ethical consumption claims that characterises the environment within which a notion of consumer as ethical must be maintained.

This complexity of the consumers’ decision-making environment has been noted (Newholm, 2005; Barnett et al., 2005b) along with the consequent variety of legitimated consumer responses (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; see also Bekin et al., in this volume). Cook (2004) offers perhaps the most vivid rendering of the complexity in ethical consumption in his examination of the supply chain for papaya. The (single) end consumer in his research does not buy papaya and, therefore, need not be concerned with the ethical issues that arise frequently in the supply chain. However, she is unaware of the many papaya by-products used in the manufacture of products she does buy. Given the complexity of modern production, we might infer that any notion of a fully informed consumer is unattainable.

Moreover, Newholm (2005) presented the spectre of the ethical consumer acting swiftly on ‘prejudice’; conversely Ehrich and Irwin (2005) argue that whilst consumers might ask for ‘ethical attribute information’ they will not always use it. The overwhelmed ethical consumer sometimes finds additional information unwelcome (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Newholm, 2005). Nevertheless, as many have argued in both the US and UK (Smith, 1995; Berry and McEachern, 2005), we have entered a period where consumers can make more informed decisions.

Arguing that too much emphasis has been placed on the individual, Barnett et al. (2005b) recently looked at the collective spaces for ethical consumption. Similarly, Cherrier (2005) sees ethical consumption more as a ‘search for meanings in life’ where those meanings are partial and continually socially (re)negotiated...
A proliferation of cultures and related concepts

Brooker used the broad term ‘socially conscious consumer’ in 1976 and it has remained in the literature (e.g. Roberts, 1996). ‘Green consumers’ appeared early in marketing research (MORI, 1994) but was widened to ‘ethical consumers’ when the range of moral concern was detected (Mintel, 1994). ‘Green’ remains as a term generally referring to consumers exhibiting environmental concerns (Diamantopoulos et al., 2003) as distinct from a broader range of social concerns.

The main proliferation of related terms has come more recently as researchers have characterised different aspects of what might be seen as a cultural phenomenon within affluent consumer cultures. Thus, ‘voluntary simplicity’ (Schor, 1985; Etzioni, 2004); ‘downshifting’ (Schor, 1998); ‘ethical simplifiers’ (Shaw and Newholm, 2002); ‘anti-consumption groups’ (Dobscha, 1998; Zavestoski, 2002; Kozinets and Handelman, 2004; Thompson and Arsel, 2004); ‘slow living’ (Parkins and Craig, 2006) each have specific and subtly different meanings. Shaw and Newholm (2002) have argued that in various ways and to different extents these can be related to the individual projects of ethical consumption.

Most of the research on ethical consumption has been in affluent countries but little comparison has been undertaken. Cross-cultural comparisons have mostly concerned the nature of consumer ‘misbehaviour’. Exceptions to this include Belk et al. (2005: 275) who noted a general lack of concern about ‘products involving harm to the environment, poor labour conditions and counterfeit goods’ in both affluent and poor nations in Europe, North America and Australasia.

In northern Europe, however, where environmental concerns have been prominent for some time, a stream of studies of pro-environmental consumption have been undertaken (see e.g. Pieters et al., 1998; Thøgersen, 2000). We could now contrast such studies in the region where fair trade was pioneered (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005b; Honkanen et al., 2006) with France with its slower development of fair trade (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). However, we would suggest that much work remains in exploring, comparing and theorising the everyday ethics of consumption and ethical consumption projects across a range of cultures.

Ethical and unethical consumption: what does it mean?

‘The socially conscious consumer can be defined as a consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private
consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change’ (Webster, 1975: 188). What such a definition includes can be problematical. Cooper-Martín and Holbrook (1993: 114) asked US consumers to ‘... list 10 of your consumption experiences that involved strong ethical considerations or implications for morality’. In addition to many concepts we would recognise in the discourse of ‘ethical consumption’, the respondents included buying US manufactured products for nationalistic rather than environmental reasons.

More fundamentally, the uncritical study of ‘ethical consumption’ presupposes an everyday ‘unethical’ consumption. As a number of scholars have pointed out this is not a viable position (Borgmann, 2000; Miller, 2001; Wilk, 2001). Moreover, as Miller demonstrated consumers present much ordinary consumption in moral terms. Similarly, Thompson (1996; Thompson and Haytko, 1997) presents concepts of the everyday ethics of consumption.

This supposed divide is conceptualised differently by Titus and Bradford (1996) with regard to US consumers. They argue that ‘unsophisticated’ consumers reward unethical business practices whilst penalising ethical business practices; ‘sophisticated’ consumers are capable of the opposite. In this respect they also conceptualise an ethical/unethical consumer divide although it is unintentional on the part of consumers. Their aim is to argue that legislative regulation ought to be proportionate to consumer sophistication and this has important implications for the policy debates not least about environmental issues.

This challenge to the evolving study of ethical consumption has led directly to an (re)examination of the (possible) moral basis of ethical consumption empirically (Barnett et al., 2005a) and, at the theoretical level, in this issue by Robert Caruana and Hélène Cherrier.

The politics of ethical consumption

What perhaps sets the study of ethical consumption apart from other marketing interests in the consumer area is its overt socio-political nature and the growing (but not universal) conviction that consumption in affluent economies will need to be restrained. These interests are reflected in the marketing literature.

Individual consumer behaviour, citizenship, spaces and collective (political) action

Ethical consumption as a political project is often rejected because it is considered too individualised to achieve a collective consciousness (Pepper, 1993), companies simply take avoiding action (Morehouse, 1998), it is immoral for corporations to respond (unless it is clearly profitable for them to do so) (Lantos, 2002) or that
ownership of all resources would be a preferable way to ensure environmental stewardship (Anderson and Leal, 1991). Whilst the idea of deploying consumption preferences in the market fits the neo-liberal concept of ‘consumer sovereignty’, that theory presupposed only individualised self-interest being expressed by consumers (Powell, 1969). This uncertainty leaves some debate about the nature and efficacy of ethical consumption (Newholm, 1999).

The boycott is the archetypal semi-organised (Gabriel and Lang, 1995) consumer action. Smith (1990, 1993) wrote the seminal work arguing that through such market oriented behaviour consumers attained a degree of sovereignty. Whether consumers have to perceive a favourable outcome to take part in a boycott is debatable. On the one hand Shaw et al. (2006b: 1062) show how ethical consumers evoke ‘vaguely conceptualised perception of a wider collective participation’. On the other, the research of Barnett et al. (2005b: 45) into campaign group localities showed how ethical consumption could ‘enrol ordinary people in active political engagement. Roles of consumer and citizen would not necessarily, therefore, be exclusive’. Although ‘success perceptions’ might be seen as influencing participation (Sen et al., 2001), Kozinets and Handelman (1998: 475) argue that in addition to the notion of a collective action, consumers frequently express their behaviour ‘as a vehicle for moral self-realisation’. Again considerations of individual virtue (Barnett et al., 2005a) are important motivators.

Over the last decade research has suggested that the number of boycotts organised worldwide has been increasing (Friedman, 1999). Indeed, the examples of boycotts against Shell (Brent Spar) and GM foods and buycotting (Friedman, 1996) of fair trade products highlight the deliberate use of consumer behaviour as a tool to further ethical goals. Connolly and Prothero (2003) argue that such message sending through consumption and non-consumption behaviours reveals the consumer as the holder of power. Thus, whilst from an economist’s utilitarian value perspective buycotting and boycotting are fundamentally different, through the voting metaphor both behaviours are seen to signal discontent to the market. This rather stronger notion of consumption as voting is presented in its most strident form in the work of Dickinson and Hollander (1991) and Dickinson and Carsky (2005). They argue unequivocally that consumers are responsible for the impact of the consumption choices they make and ought to be educated to be aware of this.

Using game theory Paavola (2001) tries to examine this relationship between individual consumer action and collective outcomes. However, perhaps the most interesting paper to address the individual/collective conundrum was not specifically directed to understanding ethical consumption. Sirsi et al. (1996) used social network analysis to study the consumption of a group of animal rights activists. Their finding of individual consumption patterns
partially organised around a loosely held set of ideas of key and peripheral members captures something of the framework of ‘consumer microcultures’ within which consumption patterns are negotiated and re-negotiated.

**Encouraging pro-social (sustainable) consumer behaviour**

An enduring concern in the study of ethical consumption has been to understand how such pro-social and pro-environmental consumer behaviour might be encouraged. As early as 1976, Brooker was interested in the personality traits of consumers exhibiting ‘socially conscious consumer behaviour’ (1976: 107). Since then, for example, researchers in both the US and Europe have considered barriers to extending the market for various fair traded products (Strong, 1997; Dickson, 2001; Nicholls, 2002); seen potential expansion in the moralism of older consumers (Carrigan et al., 2004) and the moralism of everyday consumption (Barnett et al., 2005a); advanced theories for the encouragement of ‘green consumerism’ (Muldoon, 2006); ‘positive purchase behaviour’ (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Belk et al., 2005) and to empower or encourage consumers towards sustainable lifestyles (Pieters et al., 1998; Thøgersen, 2005). These studies have sought both to learn from the practice of self-styled ethical consumers and to apply marketing expertise to the extension of such consumption.

In criticising the economistic approach to consumption, Hansen and Schrader (1997: 443) state ‘In view of the reality of modern societies, it is neither possible nor ethically justifiable to make purchase decisions according to the individual maximisation of utility only’. They present an alternative ethical model for sustainable consumption. In this context Jackson (2005) is one of the key writers in terms of encouraging sustainable consumption. Newholm (2000) has suggested a complementary observation that the moralities of ethical consumption could be seen as a resource to gain foresight into emerging trends.

**Consuming in the evolving ‘ethical product’ market**

These academic discussions have been given urgency because of events in the business and scientific worlds in response, primarily but not only, to global warming. Comfortable expectations of an ethical niche have been disturbed by reports of demographic heterogeneity (Roberts, 1996; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, 2006) among ethical consumers reflecting diversity in behaviour (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Newholm, 2005). Such ideas have been further complicated by multinationals buying, or buying into ‘ethical companies’ (Haddock, 2005), marketing a fair trade range (Beattie, 2006) and coming together to ‘tackle’ global warming (Willman, 2007).
The transfer of many fair trade products to the mass market presents many challenges to marketing and would-be ethical consumers. Low and Davenport (2005: 494) argue that such moves risk reducing the rhetoric of consumer participation to an individualised version of ethical consumption: ‘shopping for a better world’. They argue that to retain a sense of social action there needs to be ‘co-creation of value between producers, retailers and consumers’ (Low and Davenport, 2005: 494). Similarly Golding and Peattie (2005) argue that ‘social marketing’ approaches, orientated towards the achievement of social goals, are more appropriate to fair trade products than the commercial emphasis on quality and price. In this sense these authors are critical, or perhaps wary, of ‘ethical consumption’ as a mainstream marketing conceptualisation to the individualised consumer (see also Fridell, 2006). Yet some mainstream retail spaces are marketed as entirely fair trade (Barnett et al., 2005b) and this additionally raises interesting issues of choice; cheap ‘free trade’ coffee or ‘high energy’ light bulbs might not be available? Additionally we might ask whether, as fair trade becomes mainstream, Equitrade (equitrade creates a more equitable share of product value for the produce nation; Scott, 2007) will become the radical demand of ethical consumers?

**Our contributors**

Our contributors are concerned with these continuing and emerging themes: the understanding, evaluation and potential appropriation of ‘alternative’ consumption practices; a theoretical reappraisal of ethical consumption within the wider concept of consumer culture and the move from a merely individualised concept of the ethical consumer towards a more collectivised/localised concept.

Both Helène Cherrier and Robert Caruana are concerned with the construction of morality in the absence of grand narratives. Robert is concerned to challenge and deconstruct the assumed morality underpinning early studies in ethical consumption. He argues in favour of a more nuanced and explicit use of socio-philosophical concepts in the future studies of ethical consumption. By demonstrating that discourses of good consumption, whilst neither universal nor fixed, nevertheless give direction, Helène Cherrier’s notions of more localised understandings also underpins studies into the cultural nature of ethical consumption.

As Caroline Bekin, Marylyn Carrigan and Isabelle Szmigin investigate the practicalities of waste management in the ‘alternative’ lifestyles of environmentally conscious communities they also, though less explicitly than Cherrier, look at the construction of localised narratives. In that sense, they pick up on more recent developments in notions of ethical consumption. By crossing disciplines, William Low and Eileen Davenport again draw on collective expressions of consumption through the recently coined notion of ‘ethical spaces’. Through an examination of fair trade they
suggest that ethical spaces offer an opportunity to reinvigorate the politics of consumption. Where a new space is created, as with the internet, the ethics of consumption is renegotiated. In comparing ‘real world’ and ‘virtual world’ consumption, Andreas Chatzidakis and Darryn Mitussis demonstrate how the internet presents opportunities for communicating messages but raises questions about the ownership of the message. These four papers also extend the tradition of considering what ‘alternative’ consumer lifestyles, developments in marketing and new communication possibilities can offer our moral management of contemporary material cultures.

Conclusions

The study of ethical consumption has been given added urgency by rising international debates on sustainability. However, ethical consumption as an individual and collective project relocated in the cultural ethics of consumption is, we would argue, central to our understanding of consumer behaviour. The study of ethical consumption is maturing (developing themes, theories and debates) and is, as is not unusual for marketing, drawing concepts from other disciplines.

The scope for research remains wide but we would point to four areas of particular interest for the future:

- Examining the formal (constituted fair trade and campaign groups) and informal (interpretive consumer communities) micro-cultural contexts within which the practices of ethical consumption are negotiated and developed.
- Exploring further the diverse narratives of ‘ethical consumers’ and ‘consumer ethics’ in the construction of the moral-self.
- Tracing and accounting for the dynamic of ethical consumption discourses over time.
- Comparing and contrasting the varied ethical consumption discourses that arise in different cultures.

References


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