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Timothy M. Devinney, Pat Auger and Giana M. Eckhardt  
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## *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*

Do consumers really care where products come from and how they are made? Is there such a thing as an “ethical consumer”?

Corporations and policy makers are bombarded with international surveys purporting to show that most consumers want ethical products. When companies actually offer such products, though, they are often met with indifference and limited uptake. It seems that survey radicals turn into economic conservatives at the checkout. This book reveals not only why the search for the “ethical consumer” is futile but also why the social aspects of consumption cannot be ignored. Consumers are revealed to be much more deliberative and sophisticated in how they do or do not incorporate social factors into their decision making. Using first-hand findings and extensive research, *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* provides academics, students, and leaders in corporations and NGOs with an enlightening picture of the interface between social causes and consumption.

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# The Myth of the Ethical Consumer

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*For our spouses:*  
*Sandra Brandt Devinney*  
*Daphne Ng*  
*Worth Wagers*

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*By pursuing his own interest [the individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.*

Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Book IV,  
sect. I, chap. 2, para. 9.

*How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it.*

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*,  
Part I, sect. I, chap. 1, para. 1.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> xii
<i>List of tables</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xv
1 The appeal and reality of ethical consumerism	1
The ethical consumer and myth	1
Ethical consumerism versus consumer social responsibility	9
Moving from ethical consumer to C <sub>N</sub> SR	11
2 Social consumerism in the context of corporate responsibility	16
Social consumerism and firm profitability	16
Economic profit	17
Willingness to pay and C <sub>N</sub> SR	18
Economic profit in light of C <sub>N</sub> SR	23
Firm and market reactions to social consumption	24
Firms and the social consumption context	28
The evolution of preferences and the role of the firm	33
The ethical consumer and CSR	35
3 Are we what we choose? Or is what we choose what we are?	37
Radical attitudes, conservative behaviors	37
Understanding the nature of consumer choice	40
Archetypes of consumer behavior	41
Consumers as rational informed processors	41
Consumers as quasi-rational reactive purchasers	41
Consumers as quasi-rational co-producers of value	42
Consumers as actors for the adaptive unconscious	42
The consumer as <i>vox populi</i>	43
The consumer as evolved ape	46
Two meta-models of social consumer behavior	48
A linear model of social consumption	48
	ix

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-76694-4 - The Myth of the Ethical Consumer  
 Timothy M. Devinney, Pat Auger and Giana M. Eckhardt  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

x	<i>Contents</i>
	A recursive model of social consumption 51
	Implications of the models 53
	The attitude–behavior gap and its implication for measurement 56
	The four methodological flaws: incentive compatibility, comparability, inference, and context 56
	Increasing the predictive validity of intentions 59
	The myth of ethical consumption; the reality of social consumption 60
4	Ethical consumers or social consumers? Measurement and reality 64
	The importance of the consumer 64
	Experimentation and consumer social behavior 67
	Are we willing to put our money where our conscience is? 72
	Discrete choice experimentation 72
	The components of study no. 1 74
	Ethical disposition inventory 76
	The MORI poll 79
	The study sample 79
	Willingness to consider/purchase; willingness to pay 79
	How valuable is providing information? 86
	Can we believe what consumers say when not constrained? 87
	The link between surveys and experiments 87
	Will consumers sacrifice functionality? 94
	Global segments of social consumers 98
	The structure of study no. 2 98
	The sample 99
	Product features and structure of the experiments 99
	Global segments 102
	Demographics again 106
	Does “social” segment position exist independent of product context? 106
	Segment size and country differentiation 108
	The importance of recall 109
	Ethical consumerism in light of experimental reality 112
	Assessing the myth 116
5	Rationalization and justification of social (non-)consumption 117
	The contribution of interpretative methods to understanding C <sub>N</sub> SR 118
	An interpretative approach 120

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-76694-4 - The Myth of the Ethical Consumer  
 Timothy M. Devinney, Pat Auger and Giana M. Eckhardt  
 Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

<i>Contents</i>	xi
Understanding varying social consumption rationales	123
The economic rationalists	124
The governmental dependents	126
The developmental realists	128
Currents of logic and justification	132
Interpreting the myth	134
6 The ethical consumer, politics, and everyday life	137
From the consumer context to the perspective of the citizen	137
A pound for human rights, a penny for genetically modified food: a glimpse at measuring social issue priorities	140
Seeing the citizen: estimating general societal preferences	152
The consumer as citizen: linking social and consumer preference	162
7 Tastes, truths, and strategies	166
<i>De gustibus non est disputandum</i>	166
The inconvenient empirical truths	172
The convenient empirical truths	176
Strategies for enhancing C <sub>N</sub> SR	179
Jettisoning the myth	183
Appendix 1 Description of country choices and participant sampling	188
Appendix 2 Ethical disposition survey: the MORI poll and ethics scales	195
Appendix 3 Latent class finite mixture modeling	201
Appendix 4 Semi-structured interview guide used in all countries	203
Appendix 5 The logic of best–worst scaling	206
Appendix 6 Australia omnibus social, economic, and political preference study	209
<i>Notes</i>	216
<i>References</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	232

Figures

2.1 A stylized test of social versus conventional consumption	page 22
2.2 Market characterization with different assumptions about social consumption	25
3.1 A linear model of social action	49
3.2 Values, beliefs, and attitudes	50
3.3 A recursive model of social action	51
4.1 Structure of study no. 1	73
4.2 Mocked-up news article for athletic shoes	76
4.3 Example of the choice task for athletic shoes	78
4.4 Design of social and function product feature mix in study no. 1+	95
4.5 Pseudo-demand curves for athletic shoes with good social features	96
4.6 Pseudo-demand curves for bath soap with good social features	97
4.7 Impact on choice by athletic shoe segment	103
4.8 Impact on choice by AA battery segment	104
4.9 Overlap of segments for the product categories	107
4.10 Percentage of consumers recalling features from last purchase	110
4.11 Influence of feature recall on focal product feature	111
6.1 Experiment instructions and example of the best–worst task	145
6.2 Mean best–worst scores across six countries	146
6.3 Mean best–worst scores by country	147
6.4 Mean best–worst scores for sixteen social, economic, and political issues	156
6.5 Mean best–worst scores for sub-issues in four categories	158
6.6 Social, economic, and political preferences by party vote	159
7.1 The components of a C <sub>N</sub> SR strategy	182

Tables

2.1 Changes in value based on scenarios	page 28
4.1 Product features and social attributes used in study no. 1	77
4.2 Sample characteristics for study no. 1	80
4.3 Probability of considering a product based on social product features	82
4.4 Willingness to pay for social product features	84
4.5 Probability of buying a product based on whether or not social product features are mentioned in the news article	87
4.6 MORI poll responses by sample and in total	88
4.7 Correlation matrix of MORI poll responses (all respondents)	90
4.8 MORI poll responses by extreme segments	92
4.9 Sample characteristics for study no. 2	100
4.10 Product features and social attributes used in study no. 2	101
4.11 Distribution of country and segments	109
5.1 Scenarios used for interviews	121
6.1 Sixteen issues considered in the six-country best–worst experiment	143
6.2 Mean best–worst scores by country	148
6.3 Mean best–worst scores by product category segment (AA batteries)	151
6.4 Mean best–worst scores by product category segment (athletic shoes)	151
6.5 Categories of social issues	154
6.6 Best–worst scores based on human rights activities	160
6.7 Best–worst scores based on animal welfare activities	161
A2.1 Correlation matrix of MORI poll responses (all respondents)	198
A6.1 Socio-demographics of the Australia omnibus study	210
A6.2 Sub-issues by category with mean best–worst score	211

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---

## *Preface*

Any project like this one takes enormous efforts over an extended period of time. This project started in 1997 with what can be considered a random event: we were involved in an external project and a simple question was asked: “Do consumers really care?” Not having the answer at the time – and being surprised that there was nothing approaching an answer – we began what ended up becoming a quasi-systematic investigation of this question. None of us knew at the time that, ten years later, we would still be working out the answer.

No one in the team would characterize him- or herself as being involved in research on business ethics or in an academic area in which one would expect this question to be of interest. Timothy Devinney is trained as an economist (with a bit of psychology). Pat Auger is trained in management. Giana Eckhardt is a consumer behavior marketing scholar. However, what we bring to bear on this topic (along with our many collaborators) is a perspective that is untainted by a normative predisposition. It is our concern only to try and understand the phenomenon, not to change it. This book is not an advocate’s manifesto, except in wanting to bring clarity to a contentious topic. We do not deny the importance of many of the issues that we are investigating, nor that advocates for these issues have a justification in promoting them as a natural process of social, cultural, and political debate and change. However, we are operating under the belief that to understand the facts about individual social consumption behavior and to attempt to do so via the use of multiple methods in different locations is important to inform that debate. It is our role to be independent observers and arbiters.

Over the years we have had much support and many collaborators. First and foremost, the major portions of this work involved collaboration with Jordan Louviere and Paul Burke at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Russell Belk at the Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto, without whom the work would

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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

have been less scientifically rigorous and certainly less interesting. In addition, individuals such as Joachim Schwalbach and Anja Schwerk played a part in helping our thinking and giving us outlets through involvement with their conferences in Berlin and a home at Humboldt University. Grahame Dowling and various colleagues played a part in reading many drafts of the chapters and related materials, honing our thinking and making sure that we did not digress too far from the important points. Many individual research assistants were involved at different stages: Thomas Birtchnell, Carolyn Dorrian, Omer Konacki, Christina Li, Maria Mikirtumova, Sandra Peter, Michal Ulrych, and Verena Vellmer. Michael McGee, Steve Cook, and Joelle Baudet from Future and Simple provided programming support and were also involved in the making of the documentary film *The Social Construction of Consumption*, by Belk, Devinney, and Eckhardt. A copy of this documentary is included with the book. Anne Fitzsimmons, Pauline Olive, Fran Prior, and Linda Camilleri were there to keep the administration working, and also keep the administration off our backs (and warn us about money!). Rachael Weiss provided a much-needed literary and human addition to our academic prose. Paula Parish and the team at Cambridge University Press were very patient, as one must be, with academic writers such as us, who have a very different perception of time and deadlines. We would also be remiss if we did not mention the – literally – thousands of academic, student, and corporate colleagues who sparked our interest and contested our thinking at what has amounted to over 100 presentations given on this research in the last ten years. There are also the many individuals who helped with this work by simply answering our questions, being interviewed by us, and being involved in our experiments.

As will be evident, it is also the case that it is impossible to conduct the sort of research exhibited here without financial and other support. The project began with a small grant from the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong and City University, Hong Kong. Over the years we have received generous financial support from the Discovery program of the Australian Research Council, which funded the bulk of the work and continues to fund it today. In addition, the Australian Graduate School of Management and its Centre for Corporate Change provided infrastructure and people that allowed the projects to run smoothly. Timothy Devinney was also supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which named him a Research Awardee in



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Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

*Preface*

xvii

2008 and allowed him to spend time in Germany at Humboldt University working on extensions of the project, and the Rockefeller Foundation, which gave him release to work on the early stages of the book and related projects at its Bellagio Center in Italy. He has special memories of his time there and the gracious care of Ms Pilar Palacia and her team.

Finally, our greatest thanks go to our families, without whom any such project is impossible and to whom we dedicate the volume.

Timothy M. Devinney, Sydney  
Pat Auger, Melbourne  
Giana M. Eckhardt, Boston