

# How good products make you feel: The underlying emotions of ethical consumerism

Margit Hain

Faculty of Psychology, Leiden University  
margithain@gmx.de

## Abstract

*Ethical consumerism describes a more conscious way of consumption embracing products which are produced in a fair and/or environmentally positive manner. This paper investigates this growing market by explaining which emotions are evoked by these ethical products. It is argued that the psychological fundament for purchasing green products is "feeling good", "feeling moral" and "feeling powerful". First, "feeling good" embraces positive emotions and effects on one's own health and well-being. Secondly, "feeling moral" describes evoked feelings of morality and altruistic concerns about human, animal, and environmental welfare. Thirdly, "feeling powerful" focuses on ethical consumerism as means to increase one's own power and social status. Each of these emotions is analyzed by psychological theories and a practical example. At the end of the paper, the effect of the negative emotions such as fear and anger, and the possibility to combine various emotional strategies are discussed.*

In the last decade there has been a steadily increasing trend in purchasing green and fair products (Hunt & Dorfman, 2009; Loureiro & Lotade, 2005). This growing market embraces various products ranging from fair-trade coffee and organic meat in the supermarket to environmentally-friendly cars. This whole trend can be seen underneath the umbrella of "ethical consumerism". Ethical consumerism

describes a conscious way of consumption that incorporates sustainability, but also human rights, animal welfare, and fair working conditions (Tallontire, Rentsendorj, & Blowfield, 2001). This includes green products that benefit sustainable production, such as organic agriculture, and fair and social products that benefit the working conditions of humans. In line with this trend, in 2003 the

World Bank formulated that for sustainable development three aspects have to be addressed: economic, social and environmental factors (World Bank, 2003). In order to foster sustainable development it is necessary to understand ethical consumerism holistically without excluding one or more aspects. Additionally, the focus on ethical consumerism allows this paper to analyze brands which are difficult to categorize as either “social” or “green”. For example, fairtrade coffee mainly focuses on fair labor conditions and fair payment, but many brands are also concerned about environmentally friendly bean cultivation and production (Ethical Bean Coffee, n.d.).

As climate change is one of the major challenges of our time and as the labor conditions in many third world countries fail to improve, ethical consumerism is not only a fad but a necessity. In order to attract more consumers to ethical products, marketers have to understand the consumer’s motivation to purchase an ethical product. As emotions provide a strong guidance of actions and goals (Bagozzi, Gopinath & Nyer, 1999), it is of high importance to comprehend the underlying emotions of ethical consumerism to foster its effective marketing. Therefore, this paper aims to approach the research question, in which way ethical products influence consumer’s emotions leading them to purchase the actual product. The following analysis first focuses on “feeling good”, which includes the positive emotions and effects on one’s own health and well-being. Secondly,

“feeling moral” is analyzed, which concentrates on the evoked feelings of morality and altruistic concerns about human, animal, and environmental welfare. The third analysis will elaborate on “feeling powerful”, that is how ethical consumerism is a mean to increase one’s own power and social status. For each emotional category, one product or brand is analyzed which uses the specific emotion as a marketing strategy. In consideration of these outcomes, the effect of the negative emotions fear and anger, and the possibility to combine various emotional strategies are discussed.

## I. Feeling good

Positive emotions such as happiness are often used as a marketing strategy for green and fair trade products. Evoking positive emotions does not only lead to higher levels of physiological arousal, attention and recall, but also evokes a shift in orientation from a self-centered to other-centered orientation. In other words, this means that positive emotions lead to higher levels of friendliness and helpfulness, thus fostering an altruistic mindset. On an individual level, positive emotions also lead to actions that savor these emotions and nourish the positive rewards (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). Based on these characteristics, positive emotions can serve as an excellent marketing strategy for ethical consumerism. This paper argues that the combination of having an other-centered

orientation and the urge to savor one's own positive emotions, can lead consumers to purchase products which are advertised as increasing well-being (health, positive affect) but also foster pro-social and pro-environmental goals. In line with this argumentation, research by McCarty and Shrum (1994) examined the relationship between personal values and environmentally-friendly habits, such as recycling. In this study, a higher value of fun/enjoyment (excitement, warm relationships with others, etc.) was positively correlated with attitudes regarding the importance of sustainable behavior. In sum, the usage of positive emotions which promote happiness, quality of life, enjoyment, fun and enjoyment appears to be an adequate strategy for ethical consumerism.

One environmentally-friendly company, which bases their success on the strategy of "feeling good", is the American tea company "YogiTea" (YogiTea, n.d.). YogiTea is a company which produces ayurvedic herbal and spiced tea, only using ingredients which originate from organic agriculture. Their brand is closely connected to the beliefs of the yoga movement and well-being, which can be noticed in their teas names such as "Wellbeing", "Positive Energy" and "Heartwarming". Each tea has another effect on the human well-being (calming, energizing, vitality, inspiring, etc.). In accordance to the desired effect of the particular tea, a description of a yoga pose and ayurvedic information is given. The descriptions of the tea sorts are always

highly positive and focus on a healthy mind, soul and body. An example is the "Ginger Lemon" tea, which is advertised by the following:

*"The spicy taste of ginger warms the heart and lifts the spirit. The fruity, tart taste of lemon refreshes the mind and invigorates the soul. Hints of lemongrass, liquorice and black pepper add a light, spicy sweetness. Always delicious, this tea refreshes in the summer and warms in the winter. The essence of this tea is: 'Optimistic new beginnings.'"*  
(YogiTea, n.d.).

As can be seen in this example YogiTea evokes highly positive emotions through its tea advertisement. In order to reach or maintain these positive states of well-being, the consumer should have the intention to purchase this product (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). One feature which distinguishes YogiTea from other organic teas might not only be the focus on well-being and yoga, but also the little "YogiTea wisdoms": Little positive saying are attached to the string of every tea bag, such as "Happiness is taking things as they are" (YogiTea, n.d.). Besides the evoked positive emotions while purchasing YogiTea, these little wisdoms provide the consumer with additional positive emotions while consuming the product. As can be seen an ethical product, such as organic tea, can be very successfully advertised by evoking positive emotions.

## II. Feeling Moral

Besides the feeling of happiness and positivity, another strong emotion that needs to be examined is morality. As normative and environmental concerns can highly influence behavioral intentions (Bamberg, 2003), it is of high importance to understand the extent to which they influence ethical consumerism. Moral norms are also closely linked to the personal value of collectivism, which incorporates the welfare of the community, cooperation and helpfulness. Collectivistic values can direct actions and connect decisions to emotional intensity (Schwartz, 1994). It has been shown that consumers scoring high on collectivistic values, have a higher tendency to purchase sustainable products (Laroche, Bergeron, Barbaro-Forleo, 2001). In line with collectivism, research also found that people who score higher on universalism, defined as the engagement in the welfare of humanity and nature, are more inclined to protect the environment and buy more environmentally-friendly products (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Interestingly, a study by Mazar and Zhong (2010) challenges the view that “green products make us better people”. According to their findings, the mere exposure to green products made participants more inclined to act altruistic and pro-social. However, after the purchase of these green products, people were more inclined to act less altruistic compared to people who purchased conventional products.

According to Mazar and Zhong (2010) a possible explanation is that the moral self is boosted while people purchase a green product. After the purchase, this good deed can “license” non-altruistic and unethical behavior leading to more self-interested acts (Marzar & Zhong, 2010). Although this view challenges the connection between ethical consumerism and moral values, there has to be more research done to affirm these results.

Marketers for various ethical products have made use of these moral values, for example the brand “Ethical Bean Coffee” (Ethical Bean Coffee, n.d.). Ethical Bean Coffee is a company based in Vancouver, that buys their coffee beans produced under fair working and trade conditions and with respect to sustainable agriculture. Their marketing strategy is to stress their ethical values, e.g. one of their main slogans is “better for workers, better for communities, better for the environment”. On each coffee package, information is given about their social and environmental commitment. By buying Ethical Bean Coffee, the consumer does not only buy conventional coffee but also helps to promote fair and environmentally-friendly labor conditions. For each bought package of coffee it is possible to track down the particular farmer via a QR code (Ethical Bean Coffee, n.d.). This transparency allows for a concrete link between the purchase of Ethical Bean products and the support of one particular individual. By stressing these social and altruistic values, the consumer’s moral values is addressed which might lead him

to make a favorable consumer decision (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). On the homepage more detailed information can be found about various projects and background stories, e.g. more information on the company's pillars of being "Fair trade. Organic. Community-minded. Environmentally-aware." or on Ethical Bean Coffee's low emission headquarter: "Our coffee may be black, but our building is green". Research (Dodds, Monroe & Grewal, 1991) has shown that additional positive information about a brand can strengthen the perceived value and quality of the brand, which leads to a higher intention to buy its products. The success of this marketing strategy is easily noticeable as Ethical Bean's coffee has gotten more and more successful over the last few years and is about to provide its coffee all across Canada. But not only feelings of morality but also of power can make you buy an ethical product, as the next paragraph will highlight on.

### III. Feeling powerful

Besides the aforementioned emotions of feeling moral and good, another emotion can motivate consumers to buy ethical products: feeling powerful through conspicuous consumption. Generally, "conspicuous consumption" refers to the preference to purchase expensive branded products than cheaper non branded products although both are of equal quality (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010). From a rational economic perspective, it seems to

be irrational to spend more money on a luxury good which has the same functional utility as another less expensive good. But why do some consumers act so irrational? It can be argued that the phenomena of conspicuous consumption can be described by the "costly signaling theory". According to this theory, conspicuous consumption can be a costly signal to others, indicating positive and desirable characteristics of the owner (Nelissen & Meijers, 2010). One reason why ethical products can serve as costly signal is their high price (Griskevicius, Tybur & Van den Bergh, 2010). Most ethical products are more expensive than the conventional items, beginning with organic meat in the supermarket to fair trade clothing in the mall. The fact that one is able to purchase these products signals financial wealth, which is, in our society, a highly desirable characteristic. This means that obtaining more expensive goods can act as costly signals to others indicating a high social status (Plourde, 2008). Another reason why ethical consumerism can also be promoted by conspicuous consumption is a perceived high moral status by others. By buying ethical products, others can perceive the buyer as a person with high moral standards and values, which can generate a positive social reputation (Griskevicius, Tybur & Van den Bergh, 2010).

This explanation is also true for well-known case of the Toyota Prius, which has been the most sold hybrid car in the world (Toyota Prius, n.d.). The car's technology is not immensely different

from other hybrid cars, but Toyota's marketing has been decisive. According to Heffner, Kurani and Turrentine (2007) a car is not only a mean to get from A to B, but can also serve as a symbol to communicate beliefs and values. Which symbols does the Toyota Prius embody? The Toyota Prius is a car which signals environmentally-friendliness, and more generally pro-social and altruistic values. Drivers of the Toyota Prius can communicate to others that they inherit all these positive values. A survey by CNW Marketing Research, showed that more than a half of the Toyota Prius customers claim that they bought the Toyota Prius as it "makes a statement about me", whereby "low emissions" was only on the fifth place of named reasons (Maynard, 2007). In an article by the New York Times a Prius customer explains his motivation to buy a Toyota Prius with the following:

*"I really want people to know that I care about the environment. I like that people stop and ask me how I like my car."* (Maynard, 2007).

Many Prius commercials do not only feature the environmental benefits of the car, but they are also slightly different from conventional car commercials. An example is the TV commercial in 2010, showing the Toyota Prius driving through a colorfully animated world, with children dressed up as flowers, and happy singing in the background (CarlockToyotaTupelo, 2012). In a study by Laroche, Bergeron and Barbaro-Forleo (2001) it has been shown that being slightly different from the

majority can address individualistic values which are linked to social status. This means that the purchase of a product like the Toyota Prius does not only serve to make a positive statement about its owner, but also shows the world that its owner is an individual with high status.

#### IV. Feeling afraid and angry

In the earlier sections it has been outlined that positive, moral and powerful emotions can be linked to ethical consumerism and that they can be used as a successful marketing tool. On the other hand, it is important to note that negative emotions, such as fear and anger, might be an obvious but not a suitable marketing strategy. For example, a commercial for organic vegetables could advertise its products by evoking fear of the possible consequences of synthetic pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Or producers of fairtrade clothing could highlight the horrible working conditions in the producing countries. Hereby, anger could be evoked by showing that conventional brands deliberately exploit workers. Both negative emotions focus on preventing the buying of non-ethical products, in this case the non-organic vegetables or conventional clothing. However, this marketing strategy is relatively risky as it could easily backfire. Being faced with these negative emotions, the consumer might generate one of the two following coping-strategies: The first coping strategy is being problem-focused, which would lead a person to

identify the source of stress and alleviate it (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). For ethical consumerism, this could mean that the evoked fear or anger could lead to a more favorable purchase decision for ethical products instead of conventional products. In this way, the consumer could alleviate the negativity of conventional products. The second coping strategy is emotion-focused coping. Here, the person changes the problem's meaning (trying to convince oneself that it is not a problem/threat at all, etc.) or just tries to ignore the problem (Bagozzi, Gopinath, & Nyer, 1999). In this case, the consumer could simply ignore the negative consequences and continue buying conventional products. Additionally, the consumer could also try to completely avoid the source of his negative emotions, which is the negatively advertised ethical product. Using negative emotions as a marketing strategy could predispose the consumer towards emotion-focused coping, it is advised to focus on the aforementioned positive, moral and powerful emotions without the risk of backfiring.

## V. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to analyze the underlying emotions of ethical consumerism, consumerism that incorporates socially and ecologically produced products. The emotions that are evoked by ethical products, can be categorized as "feeling good", "feeling moral", and "feeling powerful". Feeling

good embraces positive emotions about health and well-being. Positive emotions can cause actions which nourish the emotion, but they can also trigger an other-centered orientation. Taken together, evoked positive emotions lead to an increased motivation to buy ethical instead of conventional products. The second examined emotion was "feeling moral," which focuses on altruistic and collectivistic values. Moral emotions can lead a consumer to prefer an ethical product over a conventional one. The third emotion of morality is triggered by conspicuous consumption, which takes account for buying luxury and high status articles in order to signal economic power. In the case of ethical consumption, conspicuous consumption of ethical products can also serve to make a positive statement about the buyer by increasing his social reputation. All in all, the practical examples of YogiTea, Ethical Bean Coffee and Toyota Prius showed that using certain emotions as marketing techniques can be a very powerful tool.

With this knowledge, is it advisable for an ethical marketer to combine all three emotions in one single communication strategy? A study by Kaptein and Duplinsky (2013) examined the effect of several influential strategies combined in one message versus the effect of a single strategy in the message. The results of this research clearly indicated that combining several strategies is less effective as there is a higher risk that the communication becomes less clear to the possible buyer (Kaptein & Duplinsky, 2013). Applying

these results to the emotions of ethical consumerism, it should be argued that it is better to focus on one concrete emotion rather than combining them. Together with the previous analysis of positive, moral and powerful emotions, this paper can provide a first guideline for effective and non-effective emotions in ethical marketing.

## VI. Conclusion

Environmental protection is undoubtedly one of the main challenges of the 21st century in which everyday actions of individuals, such as their shopping

behavior, have a huge impact. In order to effectively master this ecological challenge, the cause itself has to be tackled.

This paper investigated the research question on how emotions influence the purchase of ethical products. It is stated that emotions of positivity, morality and power do have a major effect on our ethical purchasing, and that using negative emotions such as fear and anger should be avoided. If marketing techniques will make more use of the presented academic knowledge, effective advertisement could significantly increase ethical consumption and, thereby, positively contribute to the protection of our environment.

## References

- Bagozzi, R. P., Gopinath, M., & Nyer, P. U. (1999). The role of emotions in marketing. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 27(2), 184-206.
- Bamberg, S., Hunecke, M., & Blöbaum, A. (2007). Social context, personal norms and the use of public transportation: Two field studies. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 27(3), 190-203.
- CarlockToyotaTupelo. (2012, July 16). 2010 Toyota Prius Harmony TV Commercial - Car lock Toyota of Tupelo [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9LqWd3kkkM>
- Dodds, W. B., Monroe, K. B., & Grewal, D. (1991). Effects of price, brand, and store information on buyers' product evaluations. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 30(3), 307-319.
- Ethical Bean Coffee (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.ethicalbean.com>
- Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., & Van den Bergh, B. (2010). Going green to be seen: status, reputation, and conspicuous conservation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(3), 392.
- Heffner, R.R., Kurani K.S. & Turrentine T.S. (2007). Symbolism in California's early market for hybrid electric vehicles, *Transportation Research Part D: Transport and Environment*, 12(6), 396-413.
- Hunt, N., & Dorfman, B. (2009, January 28). How green is my wallet? Organic food growth slows. Reuters. Retrieved February 20, 2009, from <http://www.reuters.com>
- Kaptein, M., & Duplinsky, S. (2013). Combining multiple influence strategies to increase consumer compliance. *International Journal of Internet Marketing and Advertising*, 8(1), 32-53.
- Laroche, M., Bergeron, J., & Barbaro-Forleo, G. (2001). Targeting consumers who are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(6), 503-520.
- Loureiro, M. L., & Lotade, J. (2005). Do fair trade and eco-labels in coffee wake up the consumer conscience?. *Ecological Economics*, 53(1), 129-138.
- Maynard, M. (2007, July 4). Say 'hybrid' and many people will hear 'Prius.' *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Mazar, N., & Zhong, C. B. (2010). Do green products make us better people?. *Psychological Science*.
- McCarty, J.A. and Shrum, L.J. (1994), "The recycling of solid wastes: personal values, value orientations, and attitudes about recycling as antecedents of recycling behavior", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 53-62.
- Nelissen, R. M., & Meijers, M. H. (2011). Social benefits of luxury brands as costly signals of wealth and status. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(5), 343-355.
- Plourde, A. M. (2008). The origins of prestige goods as honest signals of skill and knowledge. *Human Nature*, 19(4), 374-388.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1994). Are there universal aspects in the structure and contents of human values?. *Journal of Social Issues*, 50(4), 19-45.
- Tallontire, A., E. Rentsendorj, and M. Blowfield (2001), *Ethical Consumers and Ethical Trade: A Review of Current Literature*, Policy Series 12, Natural Resources Institute, Kent
- Toyota Prius (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.toyota.com/prius/>
- Vermeir, I., & Verbeke, W. (2006). Sustainable food consumption: Exploring the consumer "attitude-behavioral intention" gap. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 19(2), 169-194.
- World Bank (2003), "World Development Report 2003", in, *Sustainable Development in a Dynamic World, Transforming Institutions, Growth and Quality of Life*, New York: Oxford University Press for World Bank.
- YogiTea (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.yogitea.co>