

Looking for info? Understanding ethical consumer information management using a diary approach.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a great deal of interest in the way that pro-environmental and pro-social concerns can guide and define consumer choices. An increasing amount of academic work has studied ethical consumers, their habits and practices, narratives, meanings and experiences (Cherrier, 2009; Connolly and Prothero, 2003). Ethical consumption may be driven by macro (e.g. global warming) or micro (e.g. local economy) concerns and manifest in different manners encompassing behaviours from boycotting to bartering and ethical simplification (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Prothero *et al.*, 2010; Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2012). Extensive research has discussed the existence and origins of the “attitude behavior gap,” or why consumers do not do what they say they will (Carrington *et al.*, 2014). The struggle involved in being an ethical consumer and the accompanying feelings of anxiety and uncertainty have also been explored (Szmigin *et al.*, 2009; Hassan *et al.* 2013; Longo *et al.*, 2017). Information searches and the use and interpretation of information are part of these efforts, but they have not been the focus of past research.

The role of information in ethical consumption is paradoxical. On the one hand, it has been argued that engaging in ethical consumption requires information on three levels (McEachern and Warnaby, 2008). First, consumers need to be informed about social and environmental problems in order to adopt sustainable actions (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Meinhold and Malkus, 2005; Roberts, 1996; Strong, 1996). Second, they require information about the specific types of action to be implemented (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Valor, 2007). Third, having information about the effectiveness of each action is necessary to raise perceived self-efficacy, one of the best-documented drivers of sustainable consumption (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

Meanwhile, other studies have demonstrated the numerous problems consumers face when trying to find, process and recall information about the effectiveness of their ethical consumer actions (Berry and McEachern, 2005; Carrigan *et al.*, 2004; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006). Previous research (e.g. De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004) has emphasized limitations on the availability, quantity and efficiency of information. While ethical consumers have been often depicted as skillful information managers capable of circumventing the informational barriers that exist in most markets (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Meinhold and Malkus, 2005; Roberts, 1996; Strong, 1996), there are arguments against this position, which emphasize the disempowering role of information for consumers (see Carrington *et al.*, 2016; Longo *et al.*, 2017).

Although information search and management is a fundamental aspect of ethical consumption, existing research has not examined the information management practices

of ethical consumers in order to understand how they keep themselves informed and use information in a context of information asymmetries.

This paper thus studies the specifics of the information search process and explores the information management practices of ethical consumers by examining how information is sought, managed, interpreted and used by consumers over an 11-week period. By using a diary approach, we also obtain a naturalistic account of the phenomenon studied.

Our findings corroborate previous research on the complexity of leading ethical lifestyles, but we go a step further by identifying the different practices and strategies used when dealing with this complexity. This paper contributes to the existing literature by exploring in depth the processes by which ethical consumers search for and manage information. By adopting an exploratory focus and building on previous research on consumer information management, this study examines the different aspects and problems involved in the information management process and categorizes consumer practices used within the broader themes of maximizing and optimizing.

As a result, this paper is organized as follows: in the next section, we provide an overview of the literature regarding i) the role of information in ethical consumption and ii) information management as an aspect of consumer behavior. We then briefly present the methodology used for data collection and data analysis. Finally, we describe the main findings of this study and discuss the practical and research implications.

2.1 Information and the ethical consumer

The issue of information has been raised repeatedly in ethical consumption studies (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2011). Studies have reiterated that the absence of relevant information reduces the likelihood of ethical consumer behavior (Davies *et al.*, 2012; De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004), while the existence of relevant information facilitates the creation of ethical consumer beliefs (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). But while the literature on ethical consumption has often assumed that ethical consumers are well informed or capable of overcoming any informational barriers that exist in most markets (Meinhold and Malkus, 2005; Roberts, 1996; Strong, 1996), at the same time there has been much evidence of the lack and/or complexity of useful information (e.g. Carrigan *et al.* 2004; Longo *et al.*, 2017; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

Policymaking in the field of ethical consumption has been largely based on informational approaches and the assumption that when consumers are provided with the necessary information they will behave accordingly (Steg, 2008). However, most consumer markets demonstrate the phenomenon of “adverse selection”, a market failure that occurs when there are information asymmetries (Valor, 2008). Consumers report difficulties in locating relevant information and they are not always familiar with the information provided by Non-Governmental Organisations, consumer associations and other sources. Information about ethical consumption is dispersed and fragmented; consumers often feel as if they are trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together (Longo *et al.*, 2017; Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004). So, the information may be publicly available, but consumers claim they do not have the knowledge necessary to make decisions (Bray *et al.*, 2011). The transformation of information into knowledge can take time and involve a combination of different experiences and pieces of information (Longo *et al.*, 2017).

Hassan *et al.* (2013) find that many committed ethical consumers continually search for information in order to remain up to date. Searching for information requires time and effort and represents part of the consumption cost (Gleim *et al.*, 2013).

In addition to the problem of finding the information, consumers complain about the content of the information available. Information is often deemed incomplete or insufficient (Carrigan *et al.*, 2004). Paradoxically, consumers in other studies complain of excessive information. In Longo *et al.*'s study (2017), increased knowledge about the problems, solutions and the effectiveness of solutions could provide further difficulties for ethical consumers by making them doubt their ability to be sustainable and effect change. Information is also described as contradictory, which creates uncertainty regarding the purchase of sustainable products (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006).

Another problem is that of credibility. Information provided by the company itself is considered untrustworthy (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004). Uusitalo and Oksanen (2004) say that Finnish consumers regard magazines, consumer authorities, labels and brochures as good sources of information, although many respondents did not know what sources of information are the most accurate or complete. In fact, previous research on sustainable consumption suggests that labels are one of the best informational strategies for fostering sustainable consumption, as they provide summary information at the point of sale (Valor, 2008). Labels are considered as heuristics or cues that help consumers assess whether a product meets their ethical expectations (Verbeke and Ward, 2006). Previous research has concluded that consumers attach importance to the issuer of a label because this affects the label's credibility (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005); as such, labels endorsed by third parties are preferred (D'Souza *et al.*, 2007). Although labels may indeed act as an aide-mémoire, at present consumers have difficulties in recognizing the labels, making sense of them and trusting them (see a review in Valor, 2008).

In short, the existing literature underlines the existence of information asymmetries in the form of problems regarding the location, quantity, quality and credibility of the information needed to adopt sustainable lifestyles. Nevertheless, previous research provides few accounts of the information management practices or the type of information search (e.g. type of sources, type and timing of search, time and effort dedicated to the search etc.) carried out by ethical consumers. Instances of this can be found in different studies, but most of them focus on behaviors or behavioral intentions rather than the information search phase. This is therefore an area that requires further attention and research.

2.2 Information management practices

Although, information search and management has received little attention in the ethical consumer literature, there has been much research in the literature on consumer behavior. Traditional models of consumer behavior (Engel *et al.*, 1968; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Nicosia, 1976) emphasize the information search as a stage prior to purchase decisions. Information management practices vary depending on the consumption context and the consumer. For instance, according to Howard and Sheth (1969), an active information search is more common for first-time purchases.

Building on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982), Street *et al.* (2001) suggest that consumers may follow either the central information route when carefully thinking out their decisions or the peripheral information route when cognitive effort is minimized. Chaiken (1980) makes a similar distinction between systematic and heuristic models of information processing. In the former, consumers exert significant cognitive effort, scrutinizing all the relevant information, and in the latter they rely on learned knowledge, on the source and other non-content cues when processing the information. The differences in processing modes are attributed to the consumer's ability to conduct a search, their reasons for conducting the search and the perceived benefits and cost of the search (Schmidt and Spreng, 1996). The cost of search includes the real cost (e.g. subscription to specialized magazines), the opportunity cost (the time and effort spent) and the internal cost (the cognitive effort involved in processing it) (Zander and Hamm, 2012). Some consumers make choices solely on the basis of comprehensive information, other consumers (known as maximizers) engage in extensive information searches to try to make the best consumer decision, while others (known as satisficers) make decisions as soon as they find a satisfactory alternative (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2009).

The literature on information management in consumer behavior is extensive. However, we lack empirical evidence regarding ethical consumers' approaches to information search and management. In particular, we need to explore the information management practices of ethical consumers and how they become a habitual praxis as part of broader sustainable lifestyles (Carfagna *et al.*, 2014). By focusing on practices, our intention is to emphasize "routines over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts" (Warde, 2014; 286).

3. Methodology

This study was carried out in the context of an online Master's subject on Responsible Consumption as a voluntary activity. Ten out of a group of sixteen participants kept diaries over an eleven week period. Keeping a diary can be time consuming and requires ongoing commitment, so a high drop-out rate is often observed (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). This also poses a challenge on deciding for how long the diaries should be kept to ensure that participation will be maintained (Siemieniako, 2017). For instance, a number of authors who have used diaries in their research (Pàmies *et al.*, 2016; Richter, 2011; Siemieniako, 2017; Waskul *et al.*, 2009) set the timeframe between two to six weeks. In our case, eleven weeks was deemed a sufficiently long period to observe how consumers search for information and make use of it in different purchase contexts. At the same time, the eleven week period coincided with the Master course duration, so that we could maintain frequent contact with the participants and encourage them to fill out the diaries and return them on time. Also, in this way participants could discuss questions regarding the diary entries, their content, scope and the level of detail sought not only with the researchers but also among themselves on the Master's online platform.

Previous studies have supported the use of diaries as a data collection tool in consumer research because on the grounds that they reflect consumers' 'true' behaviors (Alaszewski, 2006; Patterson, 2005). Nevertheless, diaries have only recently started to be used more widely in consumer and marketing research (Zarantonello and Luomala, 2011). Diaries permit participants' experiences to be examined in their natural context, reduce the time

between having and then recording an experience, and are useful for studying temporal dynamics (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). They are also better than other qualitative methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups) at avoiding recall or memory bias (Alaszewski, 2006). In addition, diaries increase participants' self-awareness and may change their behaviors (Bolger *et al.*, 2003; Zepeda and Deal, 2008).

In this study, we used a combination of time- and event-based diary design (Bolger *et al.*, 2003). Participants were encouraged to fill out an entry once a week. However, to offer flexibility and to ensure that data was recorded as naturally as possible, they were asked to provide accounts of their information searches every time they carried one out. This led to a different number of entries (ranging from 7 to 14) per participant. The diary entries were submitted online and therefore did not need to be transcribed.

The diaries recorded the process of searching for information about ethical consumption (detailed accounts of the search, e.g. sources used, time and effort, search content, feelings etc.) and using this information to lead sustainable lifestyles.

The entries were often connected, e.g. entry X described the search for a specific product, whereas entry X+2 was about the decision finally taken. The naturalistic recording of data provides useful insights for ethical consumer research. Furthermore, many participants viewed keeping the diary as a personal experiment and, in their final entries, some claimed to have a better record of their habits and practices. This process of self-reflection makes diaries particularly useful for research in ethical consumption. However, diary keeping does entail also certain methodological disadvantages; for example, not all participants complied with the one-entry per week instruction, and on occasions they mentioned other topics of interest to them that were unrelated to ethical consumption.

Prior to the fieldwork, on the first day of the Master's subject the participants explained their interest in increasing their knowledge of ethical consumption, adding that they already were engaged in ethical consumption practices. Furthermore, all the participants were working, had university degrees and were of different ages and were therefore not a typically convenience student sample (see Table 1 for a profile of the participants).

The data were analyzed following the principles of Grounded Theory in recognition of the researchers' theoretical sensitivity, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Consequently theoretical insights were recorded as they emerged from the data, rather than from a preformed research hypothesis based on specific theoretical frameworks. The authors coded the data individually, and then reviewed them together as a form of triangulation. The data were coded line by line and categories about the context of use of information, objectives of the information search, and information management practices emerged from the data. Constant comparison helped to refine the categories and identify their properties. After several rounds of iteration, two broad categories were used to explain the findings: (1) the information search carried out by the participants, in which critical steps are identified, and (2) the information management practices used. These findings coalesced around the maximizing-optimizing pair, which emerged as the core category in this research.

[Insert Table 1]

4. Findings

A common finding is that participants engage in high levels of cognitive effort and spend a great deal of time on finding and processing information. As a result, they often act as maximizers and thus follow the central information or systematic processing route. However, they consistently shift to more efficient optimized types of information search and processing because of the problems in locating, processing and using information regarding ethical consumption, problems which engender feelings of fatigue, disappointment, loss of energy, anger and frustration. Whereas Maximizing is associated with the practices of Contrasting, Organizing and Informing, Optimizing is linked to the process of heuristic formation, and the practices of Consulting, Eliminating, Scrutinizing, and Choosing to believe.

4.1. Information search in the ethical consumer context

The sequential process observed in the entries is typically as follows. If consumers do not know about ethical consumer alternatives, they search in order to map them (e.g. buy organic or second hand clothing); once they have identified those alternatives, they look for more specific information so that they can actually carry them out. Some of these actions are narrowed down to specific issues (e.g. Fair trade), a product category (e.g. ethical banking) or a type of retailer (e.g. local producer). Others can be understood in terms of a lifestyle (e.g. how to live without waste or how to simplify or de-grow). The searches therefore span a wide range of consumer contexts (Dickson, 2005; Hiller Connell, 2010; Shaw and Shiu, 2003; Shaw *et al.*, 2006). Ethical banking and retirement plans, ethical mobiles, cosmetics and detergents, electricity providers, restaurants, toys and stationery are some of the examples mentioned in the diary entries.

Searches are also carried out for two types of purchases: i) those that aim to cover participants' own needs, ii) those aimed at other people, e.g. their children, nephews, friends and family. For example, in the latter case ethical options (e.g. Fair Trade flowers or non-material presents) were searched for occasions such as Mother's Day, birthdays or Sant Jordi's day (a Catalan celebration similar to Valentine's Day). The latter type of purchase highlights the symbolism of the action both as an affirmation of the individuals' identity as ethical consumers and as an expression of care for others (Shaw *et al.*, 2016), while giving a gift also serves a pedagogical role, according to the participants. For instance, Maria describes how she bought Fair Trade products for her niece's birthday.

"Instead of buying the typical toy from large retailers, I decided on Fair Trade presents. I bought them on the website of the [name] foundation, all hand made. When I give her the gift I will explain where they come from, who makes them and that we are helping out the more disadvantaged. I chose this Foundation because I know of their work." [entry 2].

My niece was so happy with the gift. It was a different gift from all the rest and the little card with it explained why it was chosen. She plays with it all the time. [entry 3]

There is another purpose in seeking information: to become a market maven in sustainability. Participants report searching, processing and storing information with the deliberate aim of becoming experts and subsequently disseminating this information to others. For example, Mariano explains in his entries that he does not use all the information he looks for. He enjoys these searches, which he sees as a learning process.

Becoming a sustainability expert is experienced as pleasurable and enriching by this informant. These ongoing searches for ethical information can fall within the maximization approach, as they allow both for a gradual inner transformation through learning, and the gradual development of heuristics that can optimize the search process in the future. Regardless of whether the information search is related to specific purchase tasks or is ongoing, it should be seen as part of a broader ethical lifestyle and a 'work-in progress' that is taking place (Szmigin *et al.*, 2009).

In terms of the moment of the search, pre-purchase searches are predominant in diary entries (Bloch *et al.*, 1986). These searches may or may not be successful depending on whether when consumers find solutions that they can implement. The above quote by Maria illustrates a successful search: she identifies ethical toys as a solution, she finds where to buy them from, she acquires them and she appraises the whole experience as positive.

However, other searches are unsuccessful for various reasons. First, because the information may be missing, difficult to locate, undecipherable or untrustworthy. The practices used to deal with these problems are discussed below.

Second, because the solutions found cannot be implemented. This may be due to lack of availability of consumer options, difficult access and ultimately a lack of fit with their other consumer projects. The case of Ana is very illustrative. She tries to buy ethical clothes, for her children but the results she finds do not meet her other requirements.

"A number of shops pop up and a number of problems. Problem 1. Impossible to buy everything in one store. This would substantially increase the transport cost. Problem 2. There are only a few items that fit in my 'no more than double' budget. Martin simply destroys his clothes so I will not pay more than that. No and no. Problem 3. Not all clothes are certified organic. I will not pay double without the right certification. Problem 4. All clothes are the same style. Sportswear and casual, but that's it. [...] I get bored with it. I will just leave it for another moment. I haven't found a satisfactory solution and I have invested about 2 days and 5 hours on this. I feel frustrated." [entry 1]

Her diary entries show how this search evolves over several weeks. In her entries, she continually emphasizes the lack of product availability, its quality, design and price and the lack of proper certification. Previous research has shown that consumers do not trade off product quality or price for ethical considerations (De Pelsmacker *et al.*, 2005; Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Hassan *et al.* 2013; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). The participants' diaries very often reveal considerations of price. In Ana's case, the solutions found do not meet her budget or other requirements, so after several weeks she reappraises the decision-making process and accepts what she sees as the second-best solution: buying in a high-street store that she recalls has a good reputation for their value chain management.

"Disappointment. I cannot find even half of what I am looking for. That's it. Tomorrow I am going to ZARA and I'll buy everything in 30 minutes. I have wasted so much time for nothing." [entry 8]

Accepting a second best or a good enough alternative (e.g. a brand with a good CSR reputation) is one of the heuristics often found in the entries after some unsuccessful attempts to find the best alternative. Buying local, shopping in local stores or from

nonprofits, or avoiding multinationals are another heuristics usually formed after some disappointing or frustrating searches. In our data, routines and the aforementioned heuristics are usually formed on the basis of available information. By way of illustration, Rebeca sticks to fair trade because it is a well-known solution, highly visible on products and is more easily located in stores. Other solutions would meet her requirements, but as she cannot find information on how to implement them in practice, she sticks to fair trade. Finally, a widespread heuristic is reducing consumption for two reasons: (1) it is seen as part of an overall efficient sustainable lifestyle and (2) by reducing consumption participants reduce the amount of purchase tasks to be carried out; that is, the less they consume, the less they have to look for information and make purchase choices.

“It is so frustrating, because the information is confusing and scarce. So, to deal with this frustration that I’ve been experiencing for some time now, I decided to buy only what was absolutely necessary” [Lidia, entry 4].

Similar stories are told by other participants who either purchase on the basis of other criteria or decide to simplify their lives by minimizing their consumption as much as possible to avoid continuous and frustrating loops in their ethical information search.

Surprisingly, labels, the most cited heuristic in sustainable consumption, are marginally used (Valor, 2008). Only a few recognize and actively look for certain labels. The diaries reveal that the Eco-label and the Fair Trade label are the most recognizable of these. Joan explains that during his visit to a specialized shop for ecological products, he came across a large collection of products and labels, which he photographed and included in the diary (entry 7). However, labels did not emerge as an important source of information in this study. While there is a certain degree of awareness, labels are rarely actively sought in stores. In their diary entries, some participants, such as Katia, describe using labels as a source of information that would fit within a Maximizing approach (e.g. recognizing all the different labels, spending time reading about them etc.). Labels are not always self-explanatory about the attribute protected or the source awarding the label. Accordingly, before a label becomes a heuristic there must be prior systematic information processing (Chaiken, 1980); that is, consumers must engage in an extensive search in order to recognize and interpret the label. It is possible to argue that consumers could save time and effort once labels have been studied and are easily recognizable. However, this barely emerges in our data. The lack of label use could be explained by other factors mentioned in various entries, such as their lack of availability, the high price of certain labels or distrust of them.

Third, participants sometimes say they are confused about which ethical criteria they should prioritize, for example, local, organic or Fair Trade. Given the lack of an ideal ethical option that meets all their ethical criteria, participants need to decide what to prioritize. Although they are concerned about the efficacy of different ethical choices, they remain confused about which decision rule to follow, and often rule out looking for further information in order to complete the purchase task. Previous research contains empirical evidence about the “competition” between ethical attributes (Shaw *et al.*, 2006) and the paralyzing effect of information (Longo *et al.*, 2017) that is confirmed in the present study. Our analysis enriches the existing evidence by showing that this confusion and paralysis is caused by a lack of information regarding the effectiveness of each solution. Consumers

cannot prioritize because they lack information about the impact of different consumer practices. Ana provides evidence of these dilemmas in several of her entries:

“Reusable diapers? No way. I have no time. It also means consuming more water, electricity and detergent. I am wondering if reusable diapers really are more environmentally friendly than the normal ones. But I don’t search for information” [Ana, entry 2].

In this case, Ana does not have solid evidence about which route to follow, so she neither searches for information nor changes her consumer choice.

There are also some instances of post-purchase searches where, in a form of a post-consumption dissonance (Cohen and Goldberg, 1970), information about the ethicality of certain purchases is often sought after the purchase. For instance, some participants looked for information in the case of more impulsive purchases or as a form of compensation. However, looking for post-consumption compensation via an information search can also prove ineffective and frustrating:

“It made me feel bad. I don’t know where the bag was made, what the production process was. I am well aware that it may contribute to pollution, especially in countries like India. This made me kind of frustrated, as the lack of information gives me doubts about this purchase” [Tania, entry 6].

4.2. Information management practices

Having described the information search carried out and the three major problems consumers found, we next describe the information management practices emerging from the data. Searching for information can prove problematic because the information found may lack of accessibility, decipherability, and trustworthiness.

First, participants may find information easily or otherwise depending on the issue. For instance, some report that there is a lot of information on issues that receive a lot of media attention, such as sweatshops or Fair Trade, but very little on others. Tania (entry 7) describes how she started a pre-consumption information search on a restaurant. Her search was “exasperating” because she found nothing on either the restaurant’s webpage or elsewhere.

Second, the information found is not always easy to understand. In some cases, the problem is whether the information found is actually available in the participants’ native language because this limits their capacity to find and understand it. In our study, all the participants are university graduates and most are bilingual in both Spanish and Catalan, while some of them also speak another language. Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, but still this may raise an issue in terms of whether access to information is compromised by consumers’ language skills, especially in the case of minority languages. For example, in her second entry Katia points out that information in English is widely available when compared to Spanish or Catalan and that this can become problematic in certain cases. The information may also be too technical, or some product categories may represent a bigger challenge for consumers.

“Banking is difficult for me to understand. I finally decided on (company) and I think that the information they provide is trustworthy [...] I looked for information on their website. I thought I wouldn’t find it but it was quite easy [...] Just to be safe, I called them on the spot to confirm that what I understood was correct.” [Tania, entry 9]

Third, even if a vast amount of information is found, it is difficult to check its veracity. According to Lidia, the Internet offers easy access to information, but it is difficult to filter what is found. In her third entry, she claims that finding information is a “task that requires time, dedication and capacity”, an issue that arises in almost all her entries.

To deal with these issues, participants engage in different practices. The first one is *Contrasting*. Lidia, for example, verifies information by comparing it to other sources.

“I obviously use the Internet more than anything else. It is easy to find information, but there is always some doubt about its credibility. I also base things on personal experience, newspaper articles and documentaries about certain issues” [Lidia, entry 11].

The second practice used here is *Scrutinizing*. *Scrutinizing* consists of choosing, trusting and using specific online and offline sources. *Scrutinizing* implies a certain level of experience, as participants may initially study different websites, forums, social network accounts etc. until their confidence in specific sources becomes established. Personal sources such as experts or other ethically-oriented consumers are perceived as truly reliable sources of information. Previous research (Papaoikonomou *et al.*, 2012) also mentions the awe in which such consumers are regarded.

“Last week we met a fundamentalist zero waste couple. We want to be like them! [...] I know there is so much information online about this. But after the long conversation with this couple I don’t think I need it! Neither do I want to spend the whole day online. I consider them a very reliable source of information because they have experience and no reason to convince us of anything” (Ana, entry 6).

Online sources are also commonly used. In several entries, Mariano explains that when information is abundant it becomes confusing. As a result, he chooses specific simpler and easy to understand websites. Some collective spaces, like forums, blogs and websites of social and environmental organizations, can inform concerned consumers (Rokka and Moisander, 2009), minimizing the cognitive effort required because of the perceived credibility of the source.

“I check the (name) blog. I love their philosophy and advice. I believe them, they talk about their own experience” [Ana, entry 3].

Social networks are also used for this purpose. For example, Pau uses Twitter to follow ethical banks such as Triodos bank and Coop57, and to keep up to date with the information they share with their followers. He also watches tutorials on YouTube about recycling and upcycling. Others, such as Tania and Katia, watch online documentaries to keep informed, read newspaper articles, check the campaigns’ list on Change.org and other platforms. According to Murray (1991) the extent of the information acquired depends more on source effectiveness than on the absolute number of sources used. Source effectiveness refers to some sources being regarded as providing more meaningful information and therefore playing a greater role in decision making, as this is the case here.

Furthermore, when these spaces permit interaction, they enable specific problems and needs to be resolved by another one of the practices employed, namely *Consulting*. *Consulting* refers to consumers asking their peers specific questions either online, as in this case, or offline.

“For various weeks, I had been looking for sustainable fashion for men. I found the (name) blog. The blog’s author mentioned a number of sustainable fashion brands but all of them were for women. So, I made a comment and mentioned my difficulty in finding sustainable fashion for men. After exchanging some messages in that same post she helped me find brands for men and to my surprise, a few days later she dedicated a post in her blog to it” [Pau, entry 6].

In order to manage the large number of sources found, the participants often engage in the systematic organization of the information, in a practice called *Organizing*.

“Well, I have kept the information and started a directory of places to find these products so that I can start using them and do my bit” [Katia, entry 10].

Indeed, similar practices are found in other diary entries: for instance in entry 9 Ana came across two shops with children’s organic clothes and although she no longer needed to make a purchase, she noted down their addresses for future reference. These behaviors further confirm that ethical consumer lifestyles are largely based on sacrifices, commitment and careful planning (Carrington *et al.*, 2014) and may involve a constant search for information to be used when necessary (Hassan *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, such efforts can ultimately optimize the search as consumers will rely on learned knowledge and experience to make ethical purchases successfully.

Some of the participants also consider it their moral obligation to disseminate relevant information to their acquaintances in an intentional way (e.g. via email or chat) or in impromptu situations. This practice is called *Informing*. Some of them aim to inform everyone in their social circle, while others simply limit themselves to passing on information to people with similar concerns.

“So, I went to buy oranges and on the packaging it said “Valencia Type Oranges” but then in small letters it said Origin: South Africa. Naturally I didn’t buy them. Then a girl I know goes towards the oranges, so I warned her. She isn’t a good friend of mine but I know she tries to be responsible. She thanked me, put down the oranges and we started talking about how deceiving packaging can be.” [Katia, entry 6].

Another practice is *Eliminating*. *Eliminating* refers to the outright rejection of certain sources of information. For example, with boycotting, there is a common sentiment of avoiding big multinationals. Big companies are often not trusted, in spite of their CSR reports and audits. Participants explicitly refer to the lack of credibility of companies’ websites and to their unconvincing CSR reports. Katia explains (in entry 6) that information in many CSR reports is confusing while on other occasions, they simply state the obvious.

“I am very disappointed when I find a CSR report saying that it allows employees who have a permanent contract to take sabbatical leave. Obviously! It is in the workers’ statute! Or that the company provides an annual medical examination to workers. Well, that’s mandatory for companies!” [Katia, entry 3].

Some participants may directly eliminate the information from big multinationals by forming the heuristic of buying in local stores, without engaging in any further searches. Others engage in contrasting because of the contradictory nature of the information found.

“If you look at their CSR reports, they have all adopted good policies but the information you get from documentaries and other sources is contradictory” [Maria, entry 4].

However, when participants cannot compare the information, or they do not find the information in their short list of trustable sources, they may decide to accept the claims made by the brand. This practice, called *Choosing to believe*, is interesting, because, by definition, information search and interpretation is a subjective process. However, it is consumer fatigue rather than conviction that defines the extent of the search. The high cost of the search makes consumers accept the claims at face value. Lidia mentions an example of this, in which she could not “find enough information to compare” with the information found and decided to believe it anyway (entry 5).

Her trust is a voluntary exercise. She decides to trust the information found instead of engaging in an extensive search that could be tiring, frustrating or unsuccessful.

Contrasting exemplifies the maximizing approach, in which more sources are obtained and participants engage in very demanding cognitive work to verify the claims made. *Organizing* and *informing* could also fall under the maximizing approach given that they require effort and involve systematic, extensive searching and the dissemination of information. However, *organizing* can optimize a subsequent information search. By contrast, *scrutinizing*, *consulting* and *eliminating* fit the heuristic model, as participants build on previous experience, learned knowledge and a few trustworthy sources to optimize their information search, ultimately in order to be more efficient in their sustainable lifestyles. Finally, *choosing to believe* is another practice used to minimize both the fatigue and time spent on an information search whilst still implicitly accepting that the information may not be valid.

5. Conclusion

Theoretical implications

The analysis of the information management practices of ethical consumers has confirmed the difficulties previously reported in the literature. Being an informed consumer in the contemporary market not only requires both external conditions to be met regarding the quality and quantity of information, but also consumer skills related to information search, processing and organisation. Unlike Payne *et al.* (1992), reading, understanding and comparing information seem to be complex tasks in the ethical consumer field, instead of elementary information processes which create frustration and fatigue among consumers. In overall terms, our findings consistently reveal major investments in terms of the cognitive effort and time used to find and process ethical consumer information. This is because a wide range of information sources are sought and a single search about a product category (e.g. Pau’s search for sustainable fashion for men or Ana’s for organic children clothes) may take weeks or months. Also, the information obtained may not be easy to understand (e.g. too technical or not available in the participant’s native language). This is not surprising, since ethical consumption has been seen as an expression of economic and cultural capital (Baumann *et al.*, 2015; Carfagna *et al.*, 2014), and as such only those most skilled in dealing with information can lead a sustainable lifestyle. Furthermore, for ethical consumers, being more knowledgeable than their peers provides them with symbolic capital insofar as they are respected in their milieu as sustainable heroes.

Our findings show that in addition to price and availability, the quantity and quality of information determines the type of consumer it is possible to be. We found many instances where information (rather than personal preferences) shapes the routines of responsible consumers. Accordingly, we agree with those who reject the notion of a sovereign consumer: the consumer's sovereignty is constrained by consumers' skills, income, place of residence and the consumers' other life projects (Carrington *et al.*, 2016). In contrast to past studies where these difficulties are often interpreted as a form of neutralization or as an explanation for the attitude-behavior gap (Chatzidakis *et al.*, 2016; Hassan *et al.*, 2013), our study shows how consumers employ a number of practices to circumvent the difficulties they encounter. Our results show that consumers are not the passive receivers of information that they are typically conceptualized as being in one-way informational models. This could explain why it has proven so difficult to mainstream responsible consumption. Consumers interpret, resist, and negotiate information sources and content (Eden *et al.*, 2008). Their rejection of corporate sources, their disengagement with labels, and their contention regarding ethical cues are examples of their agentic role consumers vis-à-vis information. This negotiation of information is even more acute in sustainable consumption as it is itself being negotiated (Gjerris *et al.*, 2016). Not only are the definitions of 'ethical' ambiguous, but there are also conflicts and trade-offs between ethical attributes and traditional attributes, as well as between different ethical issues. Finally, the longitudinal analysis reveals that information management is ultimately oriented towards optimizing and creating heuristics or simpler decision rules that can free ethical consumers from the cognitive effort and the time costs of engaging in extensive searches for each purchase (see Figure 1). Drawing on Street *et al.* (2001), all participants clearly display a high need for cognition and engage in central information processing, but tend to shift to practices that optimize the information search and management. Moreover, the success or failure of the search generates different emotions, and determines future behavior both in terms of consumption and information management. While participants may initially prioritize accuracy over effort, as time passes this may change due to the consumers' emotional experiences, such as fatigue, frustration and lack of results (Payne *et al.*, 1992).

Practical implications

The need to reduce the cognitive effort linked to ethical consumers' information search is an interesting field for practitioners. First, regarding content, informational strategies should match the heuristic formation process of consumers. Second, regarding sources, the use of new technologies can minimize the effort invested in the information search and acquisition. For instance, Watts and Wyner (2011) explain how mobile technology-enabled ethical consumption (MTEC) tools can support the ethical consumer movement. The Internet and other information technologies open up new avenues by overcoming information asymmetries, providing access to information and disseminating information (Rezabakhsh *et al.*, 2006). Examples include mobile applications such as the Good Guide or Provenance. There is certainly room for innovation in relation to communication technologies and ethical consumption, since "smartphones are poised to enable ethical consumption in ways never before possible" (Watts and Wyner, 2011). New technologies, such as mobile applications and geolocalization, can overcome some of the problems

identified in this study regarding information searches and optimize information management. Furthermore, social networks can enable some of the information management practices described here, such as *Consulting*. Companies and NGOs that target ethical consumers should therefore make good use of them.

Practitioners and policymakers should also take into account the apparently limited usefulness of labels for ethical consumers for different reasons: they require extensive searches prior to their use for heuristic purposes; they may be received with distrust; they are not available or too expensive, so the action cannot be implemented anyway.

Future research lines

Future research could explore information management in relation to the way that ethically concerned consumers use social networks, for example by following the Twitter account of an ethical company or through WhatsApp groups. Twitter may be particularly useful because it conveys information quickly and efficiently using 140 characters (Lovejoy and Saxton, 2012).

Expertise and homophily of seeker and source on being ethically concerned are relevant (Gilly *et al.*, 1998) and should be further explored. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how ethical consumers interchange roles as providers and seekers of ethical information in relation to their different interpersonal sources, and how this may contribute to the construction of their ethical identity. Another issue that warrants attention is the required level of consumer literacy and cultural capital for ethical consumption (Baumann *et al.*, 2015; Carfagna *et al.*, 2014). According to Adkins and Ozanne (2005), consumer literacy is the “the ability to find and manipulate text and numbers to accomplish consumption-related tasks within a specific market context”. Such research would be useful given the complexity of ethical consumer purchases.

Information management practices and ethical consumption practices should also be studied for different issues and product categories. Media coverage draws attention to certain issues (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), whereas repeated exposure to moral issues facilitates their recognition and could create ethical consumption habits (Gautschi and Jones, 1998).

6. References

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