

Linking Transformative Consumer Research and Human Rights in Support of Socially Responsible Business

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Over the last two decades, numerous opinion polls have identified a large majority of consumers who claim they are supportive of socially responsible business. A series of polls conducted in the mid to late 1990s by Marymount University found that between 75 and 79% of consumers would avoid shopping at retailers that sold garments made in sweatshops and 83 to 86% would pay \$1 more for a \$20 garment guaranteed to be made in good conditions (see Elliott & Freeman, 2003). In the late 1990s, my own study of a national sample of consumers found that over 81% desired to have apparel made by child labor banned from sale and over 72% thought there should be governmental regulations in place to protect workers in the apparel industry (Dickson, 1999). Vogel's (2005) summary of poll findings reflects similar results, including that 75% of consumers in the United States would avoid purchasing products made in poor working conditions and that 71% of French consumers would pay more to purchase a product free of child labor.

Recent polls continue to provide similar hope that an ethical consumer market will provide impetus for companies to pursue fair labor standards and safe working conditions for those making their apparel products. For example, a poll conducted by Hertel, Scruggs, and Heidkamp (2009) found that 62% of consumers are willing to pay more for a sweater guaranteed not to be made in a sweatshop. While

the results of these polls have almost certainly encouraged at least a few companies to target a market of ethical consumers, most apparel brands and retailers are not speaking publicly about their efforts and appear to have made only limited steps in implementing social responsibility practices (Dickson & Kovaleski, 2007).

In this paper, I review my own and other studies that suggest that the actual ethical consumer market is much smaller than reported in opinion polls. I share how I have come to realize that businesses need to pursue social responsibility even in the absence of an ethical consumer market. Finally, I suggest ways of reframing consumer research to enhance its value in support of socially responsible business activities. Specifically, I cover the following topics.

- Despite polls that continue to suggest that large majorities of consumers are supportive of socially responsible businesses, only a small minority of consumers actually act in ways that support social responsibility.
- Businesses must practice social responsibility in order to respect human rights. The marketing concept that consumer researchers are familiar with is not relevant, instead what I call the responsibility concept comes into play.
- The most helpful consumer research would actually contribute to a transformation in consumer

behavior in support of human rights and socially responsible business.

1. Small Numbers of Consumers Act in Support of Social Responsibility

I have focused my research on topics related to social responsibility for 20 years. During a study tour in Chiapas, Mexico in 1991 I observed a woman weaving a beautiful double brocade textile on a backstrap loom outside the small hut she lived in.¹ I was struck with the knowledge that people with such talent for creating beautiful and intricate products, could achieve so little economic success from that work. Because of a range of political and social factors that I wanted to learn more about, this talented woman would earn no more than a few pesos for this weaving that took weeks to complete—far less pay than would cover the materials used in the weaving. This experience led me to my first research on the topic of fair trade in hopes that I could somehow generate knowledge that would give this weaver and her family, and many other desperately poor women with few opportunities to better their lives, new opportunities and a fairer place in the global market (Littrell & Dickson, 1999).²

Along with colleague Mary Littrell, I embarked on a research program covering various aspects of fair trade, including why consumers did or did not buy apparel sold by alternative trading organizations (ATOs) practicing fair trade; how ATOs operated, the goals they pursued, and how they could possibly survive as businesses that focused their greatest attention on the producer of products versus consumers; and what artisans like the woman I had met in Chiapas hoped to gain through production of textile products for export (see Littrell & Dickson, 1999). One study we conducted indicated that fair trade consumers, while highly supportive of the mission of fair trade, primarily made purchase decisions based on whether they liked the product and thought that buying a fair trade product was a good thing to do. As well, these fair trade consumers indicated some willingness to sacrifice product attrib-

utes to support fair trade (Dickson & Littrell, 1996).

The global fair trade market, however, was quite small so in the early to mid 1990s when there was increasing media attention to the mainstream apparel industry that provided U.S. consumers with virtually all of their clothing, I turned my research attention to the controversial issues of labor standards and working conditions in factory production. In the early 1990s, sport footwear giant Nike was in the news for paying excessively low wages to workers in Indonesia (Ballinger, 1992). Child labor and other unfair labor conditions in the United States and Central America, where the popular television host Kathie Lee Gifford had apparel made in her name to be sold by Walmart, brought issues of social responsibility to light for many Americans in 1996 and 1997 (Associated Press, 1997). There were reports from labor groups such as the National Labor Committee that well-known brands were subcontracting work in China that was carried out under exploitative conditions (Bourbeau, 1998). Having learned about the values and practices of ATOs, I believed that some fair trade practices could be applied in the mainstream apparel industry.

As a result of my emerging research program I was very interested in new initiatives including the U.S. Department of Labor's Trendsetters List and the later possibility of a "no sweat" label that would be earned by brands that were part of the White House Apparel Industry Partnership. As well as providing information, these initiatives were aimed at invoking consumer altruism in support of socially responsible apparel brands that were attempting to improve the working conditions in their factories. Given the weak role that altruism played in fair trade consumers' intentions to make purchases in support of disadvantaged artisans, however, I was highly skeptical that there was a significant mar-

¹ A backstrap loom uses equipment strapped around the back of the weaver and attached to a fixed object such as a house post allowing women weavers to use shifting body weight to operate the loom (Littrell & Dickson, 1999)

² Fair trade is a philosophy and set of practices for global trade that "fosters empowerment and improved quality of life for artisan producers" (Littrell & Dickson, 1999, p. 5).

ket of consumers desiring products sold as socially responsible by mainstream apparel brands and retailers.

An early study focused on learning how consumers across the United States perceived workplace safety, child labor, working hours, and wages in factories making apparel in the United States and in foreign countries. As well, I asked consumers about the willingness to trade off quality or other product characteristics in support of purchasing from socially responsible brands. Not surprisingly, the responding consumers perceived that working conditions in foreign factories were problematic and expressed concern about the workers. As well, they indicated support for government regulations that would ban these products from sale in the United States and for labeling initiatives guaranteeing consumers the products were not made in sweatshops. Yet, despite their professed concerns, consumers indicated less willingness to purchase products made in socially responsible factories when the products were of lower quality or higher price (Dickson, 1999). In a later study, I found consumers' concerns for workers in apparel factories would lead them to support socially responsible businesses, however, that support did not carry through to purchase intentions. Rather, consumer purchase intentions were determined by brand loyalty and their desire for fashionable products (Dickson, 2000).

Probably my most important study examined the potential use of a "no sweat" label by consumers when faced with tradeoffs of price, quality, and other product characteristics typically important to the purchase of a particular item. I asked consumers to rate the likelihood of purchasing eight different shirts (written descriptions were provided) that were experimentally varied on key product attributes including a label indicating some shirts were not made in sweatshops. Using conjoint analysis, I was able to indirectly identify which attributes were most influential to the ratings of purchase intentions, rather than having consumers directly rate each attribute (and potentially inflate the importance of a "no sweat" label). For the majority of consumers, the no sweat label was not prioritized as highly as price, quality, and others attributes. Yet about

16% did prioritize the no sweat label over any product attribute when indicating purchase likelihoods (Dickson, 2001). This is a much smaller ethical consumer market than opinion polls have identified.

My identification of a smaller ethical consumer market than indicated in opinion polls has been supported by research of others. Carrigan and Attalla (2001) found that while consumers were aware of Nike's social responsibility issues, they would still buy from the company. The consumers studied claimed that the attributes of price and value, fashionability, and brand image were most influential to their buying decisions. The authors concluded that consumers would purchase ethically only if it meant no product sacrifices. Likewise, Joergens (2006) found minimal evidence that British consumers' purchases of apparel were influenced by social responsibility issues. Instead, the consumers studied placed the highest priority on their own personal needs. Additionally, while a study of Gap consumers found them to be highly aware of issues of social responsibility; they were most influenced by price, quality, and style features when purchasing garments (Ivanow et al, 2005). Finally, Auger et al. (2003) found the athletic footwear consumers they studied did not feel knowledgeable about the ethical attributes of products they purchased. Although ethical attributes were of value, the most influential attribute to their purchasing was fit.

The body of literature on apparel consumers and social responsibility suggests that while large numbers of consumers claim to be supportive of business activities that ensure fair labor and good working conditions, a much smaller number follow through by prioritizing social responsibility when purchasing garments. This somewhat disappointing finding could lead researchers to discourage businesses from spending resources on social responsibility activities. In fact, however, businesses need to practice social responsibility anyway. What I refer to as the 'responsibility concept' over-rides the 'marketing concept' when it comes to social responsibility to workers producing a brand or retailer's apparel.

2. The Responsibility Concept vs. The Marketing Concept

Most researchers carrying out consumer research implicitly ground their work on principles of the well-known 'marketing concept,' which commands that consumers be identified and targeted, often with the assistance of consumer research, so that products and services that are developed match what is desired by consumers. The marketing concept has been the focus of modern business for decades; it replaced the product concept where firms would make products without regard to market needs, and then attempt to find ways to convince consumers to buy the products. From a marketing concept frame of reference, researchers might interpret the small segment of consumers supporting socially responsible production as a limited niche market warranting limited pursuit by brands and retailers. In fact, the limited market for social responsibility does not relieve businesses of their social responsibilities.

Through my involvement on the board of directors of the Fair Labor Association,³ a multi-stakeholder initiative aimed at improving working conditions in factories around the world, I have had the opportunity to engage closely with brands and retailers that are leading efforts in social responsibility in the apparel industry. As well, I have participated in many other industry events and meetings focused on social responsibility attended by companies not involved with the Fair Labor Association. An important perspective I have gained through this work is that while a larger and more influential base of consumers supporting social responsibility would be helpful in supporting business leadership in social responsibility, *the lack of this large base does not excuse brands and retailers from working in more socially responsible ways*. Companies need to practice what I am calling the responsibility concept. The responsibility concept requires that companies ensure their policies and practices uphold internationally agreed upon human rights of all the diverse stakeholders they impact through their business.

Internationally agreed upon standards for human rights have been in existence since 1948 when the United Nations approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Human rights are the basic standards that allow all individuals equality and to live freely and in dignity (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights). International laws and treaties governing human rights require that countries protect individuals from human rights abuses by third parties. Over the last two decades, the connection between business and human rights has been clearly established (Castan Centre for Human Rights Law, 2008). While it is most obvious that business can influence labor rights associated with human rights, including forced labor, child labor, a safe work environment, and others, John Ruggie, the Special Representative to the United Nations on Business and Human Rights, contends that businesses can influence virtually all internationally recognized human rights (e.g., right to education, right to physical and mental health) and as such, companies have a responsibility to respect those rights. Respect for human rights requires companies to practice due diligence, taking steps to comply with national laws and manage the risk of infringing on individuals' human rights (Ruggie, 2008). Particularly, companies need to do the following.

- adopt human rights policies and sufficient detailed guidelines to make them functional,
- take steps to understand how current and future company activities may impact human rights,
- integrate human rights policies throughout the company, and
- track performance against human rights goals.

Many companies have not put adequate systems into place to ensure human rights are respected (Ruggie, 2008).

While the scope of this paper precludes a depth analysis on the responsibilities of corporations to respect human rights, the critical point is this--the lack of or small size of a consumer market for social respon-

³ www.fairlabor.org

sibility does not relieve apparel brands and retailers of their responsibilities to respect human rights. How then can consumer researchers assist companies in their social responsibility efforts?

3. Transformative Consumer Research

Despite the necessity of apparel brands and retailers to engage in socially responsible business activities supporting human rights, a larger consumer market for that work would be helpful for a variety of reasons. First, it would encourage those businesses more accustomed to pursuing the marketing concept and not yet pursuing the responsibility concept to see the value of adopting a human rights approach to social responsibility. Second, expanded consumer support would potentially help offset the added costs of due diligence necessary for respecting human rights. Thus, consumer researchers should reframe their research to focus on generating knowledge about how to educate consumers and expand the market for socially responsible business.

Dickinson and Carsky (2005) contend that consumers need to consider the consequences their purchases have on others. Yet few consumers have the opportunity to be educated with this perspective since self-interest is a dominant paradigm in business and economics teaching. As a result, the authors argue that

“teaching individual members of society that they should be responsible for the consequences of their action, if such consequences could be reasonably and steadily ascertained, should be integral to various levels of education . . . educators should be enlisted in an attempt to change the values and assumptions underlying the dominant approach in the USA and in much of the developed world with respect to consumer purchasing” (Dickinson & Carsky, 2005, p. 31).

There are a variety of ways that research could inform a transformational experience for consumers by

- identifying gaps in consumer knowledge about the consequences of their purchasing and how to fill those gaps,

- examining labeling, public reporting, messaging/message complexity, and other strategies to identify how best to engage with consumers on social responsibility and human rights, and
 - developing highly aware consumers that purchase in ways that support social responsibility/human rights.
- All these research topics fall in the domain of a new area of inquiry termed “transformative consumer research, which “benefits consumer welfare and quality of life for all beings affected by consumption across the world.” (www.acrwebsite.org). I encourage researchers to adopt this perspective as they embark on research related to ethical consumption.

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