



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

---

Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

## **Ethically Concerned, Yet Unethically Behaved’’: Towards an Updated Understanding of Consumer’S (Un)Ethical Decision Making**

Andreas Chatzidakis, University of Nottingham

Andrew Smith, University of Nottingham

Sally Hibbert, University of Nottingham

“Ethically Concerned, yet Unethically Behaved’’: Towards an Updated Understanding of Consumer’s (Un)ethical Decision Making  
Andreas Chatzidakis Nottingham University Business School Sally Hibbert Nottingham University Business School Andrew  
Smith Nottingham University Business School Abstract: The paper complements existing research on ethical consumer behavior by  
examining how people cope with the psychological tensions that arise when they behave in ways that are in apparent contradiction to  
their expressed ethical concerns. It advances the concept of neutralization (Sykes and Matza 1957) - justifications that soften or  
eliminate the impact that norm violating behavior might have upon self-concept and social relationships - and presents hypotheses on  
the role of neutralization in ethical consumer decision making processes.

### **[to cite]:**

Andreas Chatzidakis, Andrew Smith, and Sally Hibbert (2006) , "Ethically Concerned, Yet Unethically Behaved’’: Towards an Updated Understanding of Consumer’S (Un)Ethical Decision Making", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 33, eds. Connie Pechmann and Linda Price, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 693-698.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12297/volumes/v33/NA-33>

### **[copyright notice]:**

This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

# “Ethically Concerned, yet Unethically Behaved”: Towards an Updated Understanding of Consumer’s (Un)ethical Decision Making

Andreas Chatzidakis, University of Nottingham

Sally Hibbert, University of Nottingham

Andrew Smith, University of Nottingham

## ABSTRACT

The paper complements existing research on ethical consumer behavior by examining how people cope with the psychological tensions that arise when they behave in ways that are in apparent contradiction to their expressed ethical concerns. It advances the concept of neutralization – justifications that soften or eliminate the impact that norm-violating behavior might have upon self-concept and social relationships – and presents hypotheses on the role of neutralization in ethical consumer decision making processes.

## INTRODUCTION

Research into ethical consumer behavior has grown substantially since the 1990s (Vitell 2003) and has provided valuable insights, yet it remains a relatively small body of literature and we still lack a unified understanding of the role of ethics in consumer behavior. One of the key challenges identified by researchers in this field relates to the fact that people’s ethical concerns are often not manifest in their behavior (e.g. Carrigan and Atalla 2001; Strong 1996). Here we address the attitude-behavior discrepancy in ethical consumer behavior, advancing the concept of neutralization – a process through which people justify or rationalize their behavior – as a means of coping with decision conflict and insulating themselves from blame and guilt. We start with a review of extant literature on ethical consumer behavior; then introduce the concept of neutralization and consider its application to consumption contexts. Subsequently the paper examines the theoretical tenets of neutralization with a view to integrating the concept with existing models of ethical consumer behavior.

## ETHICS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Ethical consumer behavior can be broadly defined as the “decision making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns” (Cooper-Martin and Holbrook 1993, 113). Earlier research on ethical consumer behavior was prompted by the consumerism movement of the 1970s, and investigated specific topics in the context of “environmentally concerned/conscious consumption” (e.g. Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Webster 1975; Brooker 1976; Antil 1984; Haldeman, Peters, and Tripple 1987; Alwitt and Berger 1993; Jackson et al. 1993). Similarly, studies emerged for issues such as self-restraint (Horowitz 1985), voluntary simplicity (e.g. Leonard-Barton 1981; Shaw and Newholm 2002), ethical investing (e.g. Irvine 1987; Lewis 1999), consumer boycotts (e.g. Smith 1990; Burke, Milberg, and Smith 1993) and shoplifting (e.g. Kallis, Freeman, and Zelditch 1986; Moschis and Powell 1986; Cox, Cox, and Moschis 1990).

More general treatments of ethical consumer behavior can be grouped under two headings: “ethical consumerism” and “consumer ethics”. “Ethical consumerism” (e.g. Shaw and Clarke 1999; Creyer and Ross 1997; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Roberts 1996; Straughan and Roberts 1999) can be seen as an evolution of green consumerism. In contrast, “consumer ethics” (e.g. Vitell and Muncy 1992; Vitell et al. 1991; Fullerton et al. 1996; Albers-Miller 1999; Singhapakdi et al. 1999) refers to misconduct, mainly in retail settings (e.g. failing to declare undercharging).

Central amongst this research have been attempts to develop theoretical models of consumers’ ethical decision making either in particular contexts (e.g. Fullerton and Punj 1993; Jackson et al. 1993; Tan 2002; Thong and Yap 1998; Whalen et al. 1991; Nebenzahl et al. 2001) or the broader domains of ethical consumerism (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2002a, 2002b, 2003) and consumer ethics (Marks and Mayo 1991; Vitell et al. 2001; Fukukawa 2002). In this endeavour, the two most prominent theoretical approaches have been Hunt and Vitell’s (1986) general theory of marketing ethics and Ajzen’s attitude models (Ajzen 1985, 1991). Hunt and Vitell’s model (1986, 1992) was applied to ethical consumer contexts by Marks and Mayo (1991) and Vitell et al. (2001) (see also Thong and Yap 1998). They propose that the ethical decision process begins with the consumer perceiving an ethical problem (exogenous variables include the consumer’s cultural environment, reference groups and past personal experiences; Marks and Mayo 1991). Subsequently, s/he combines a deontological and a teleological evaluation to arrive at a judgment, i.e. attitude about the ethical problem<sup>1</sup> which, in turn, influences the consumer’s behavioral intentions. It is suggested that teleological evaluations affect intentions indirectly through ethical judgments but also directly. That is, an individual may not choose the most ethical alternative due to desirable consequences of a less ethical one. Furthermore, intention may differ from actual behavior due to situational conditions enabling consumers to engage in unethical behavior (e.g. the opportunity to adopt an alternative). Finally, the consequences of the consumer’s behavior become part of the consumer’s learning experiences. In the case of choosing an unethical alternative, the consumer might have guilt feelings that will affect future behavior.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991) applied in ethical consumer contexts by Fukukawa (2002) and Shaw and colleagues (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2002a, 2002b, 2003), suggests that behavior in a specified situation, is a direct function of behavioral intention, which in turn is a function of attitude and subjective norm. Perceived behavioral control refers to the individual’s control beliefs and is suggested to impact both behavioral intentions and behavior. Both of the above models are established on the fundamental premise that an individual’s intentions are consistent with ethical judgments in most cases (Fukukawa 2002). However, as in other consumption contexts, there is clear evidence of attitude-behavior discrepancies: consumers’ ethical concerns and attitudes are not always manifest in actual behavior (e.g. Carrigan and Atalla 2001). For example, consumers have been found to buy environmentally hazardous products regardless of their expression of concern for greener alternatives (Strong 1996) and to shoplift regardless of their adherence to societal and economic norms of behavior that guide

---

<sup>1</sup>Teleological ethical theories hold that the moral worth of actions is determined solely by their consequences. Deontological theories hold that one or more fundamental principles of ethics differ from the principle of utility; they are based on principles of duty such as “never treat another merely as a means to your own goals” (Beauchamp and Bowie 1988, 37)

marketplace behavior (Strutton, Vitell, and Pelton 1994; Strutton, Pelton, and Ferrell 1997). Generally, attitude-behavior discrepancies have been accounted for by sampling, operationalization and behavior-specific issues (see e.g. Ogden 2003; Luzar and Cosse 1998) or by the addition of further constructs. For example, in the context of consumer ethics, Fukukawa (2002) has proposed the addition of a fourth construct affecting intentions, namely "perceived unfairness"; while in the ethical consumerism field, Shaw and colleagues (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2002a, 2002b, 2003) have proposed the addition of two constructs, namely "ethical obligation" and "self identity". The additional influences that are apparent in the context of ethical consumer behavior point towards the internal tensions that consumers feel when balancing their own desires with moral behavior that favors societal well being. However, both models inevitably fail to account for the psychological realities of consumers who consistently behave in ways that are in apparent contradiction to their expressed ethical concerns.

Theories of cognitive or attitude-behavior consistency within social psychology, in general, have left the diverse modes of restoring equilibrium without attitude change unexplored (Hazani 1991). Even within the cognitive dissonance literature, where attitudes after performing a counter-attitudinal behavior have been found to remain in striking opposition to that behavior, the focus has largely been on the arousal of dissonance, as opposed to the subsequent processes that lead to attitude change; hence generating little evidence regarding the nature of those processes (Kunda 1990; Holland et al. 2002). Accordingly, Holland et al. (2002) observe that there is surprising little research on the different ways in which people justify their attitudinally-incongruent behavior: "Although many different examples of self-justification have been documented in the psychological literature, this has not produced a comprehensive taxonomy of self-justification strategies" (Holland et al. 2002, 1714). The concept of neutralization and the associated taxonomy of neutralization techniques is one theoretical contribution that promises to fill this gap.

### INTRODUCING TECHNIQUES OF NEUTRALIZATION

Social norms play a crucial role in guiding ethical behavior (e.g. Davies et al. 2002). When social norms are not internalized to the degree that they guide behavior under all circumstances, consumers may develop coping strategies to deal with the dissonance that they experience. Neutralization theory represents a conceptual approach that has been applied to understand how individuals soften or eliminate the impact that their norm violating behavior might have upon their self-concept and social relationships (Grove et al. 1989).

In 1957, Sykes and Matza published their seminal article on juvenile delinquency criticising the predominant theoretical viewpoint that delinquency is a form of behavior based on the values and norms of a deviant sub-culture in the same way as law-abiding behavior is based on the norms and values of the larger society. These authors suggested that rather than learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in a complete opposition to those of his/her society, the delinquent learns a set of justifications or rationalizations, i.e. the techniques, which can insulate him/her from self-blame and the blame of others. This perspective can be attributed to the flexibility of the normative systems in contemporary societies: rather than being categorical imperatives, social norms or values are "qualified guides for action, limited in their applicability in terms of time, place, persons, and social circumstances" (Sykes and Matza 1957, 666). For example, the

moral injunction against killing does not apply in time of war and so on. Thus, the delinquent learns patterns of thought that help him/her to remain committed to the normative system and qualify his/her actions as "acceptable" if not "right". While neutralization techniques may be viewed as following unethical behavior, ultimately they can precede it, and make unethical behavior possible. That is, once successfully internalized, they can truly become neutralizing devices (Grove et al. 1989). The five techniques, as adapted by Strutton *et al.* (1994, 254) in a consumer context, are listed below:

- 1) Denial of responsibility (DoR): A circumstance in which one argues that s/he is not personally accountable for the norm-violating behavior because factors beyond one's control were operating; e.g. "It's not my fault I don't recycle, the government should make it easier".
- 2) Denial of Injury (DoI): A circumstance in which one contends that personal misconduct is not really serious because no party directly suffered as a result of it; e.g. "What's the big deal, nobody's gonna miss one towel!"
- 3) Denial of Victim (DoV): A circumstance in which one counters the blame for personal actions by arguing the violated party deserved whatever happened; e.g. "It's their fault; if the salesman had been straight with me I would have told him he undercharged me".
- 4) Condemning the condemners (CtC): A circumstance in which one deflects accusations of misconduct by pointing out that those who would condemn engage in similarly disapproved activities; e.g. "It's a joke they should find fault with me after the rip-offs they have engineered".
- 5) Appeal to higher loyalties (AtHL): A circumstance in which one argues that norm-violating behavior is the result of an attempt to actualize some higher order ideal or value; e.g. 'I'd like to buy more environmentally friendly products but the choice is limited and I like trying out different stuff'.

Since its original formulation by Sykes and Matza, neutralization theory has been one of the most widely known and frequently cited theories in sociology of deviance, either incorporated into or rebutted by most subsequent theories of crime and norm-violating behavior (Minor 1981; Copes 2003). Examples of its application include a variety of juvenile (e.g. Ball 1966; Minor 1981; Costello 2000) as well as adult deviance contexts (e.g. Levi 1981; Eliason and Dodder 1999; Fox 1999). Further, neutralization theory has been the subject of more intuitive applications, both within and beyond the boundaries of what is typically labelled as deviant behavior. Examples include the role of neutralization techniques in the victimization of battered wives (Ferraro and Johnson 1983), genocide and the Holocaust (Alvarez 1997), organizational rule enforcing (Fershing 2003), abortion (Brennan 1974), religious dissonance (Dunford and Kunz 1973) and the management of the "temporary deviant" label of pageant mothers in the United States during the peak of negative press in 1997 (Heltsley and Calhoun 2003).

Neutralization has been applied to consumption contexts, but research in this domain remains very limited. Grove et al. (1989) advanced the concept as a basis for understanding non-normative behavior, mainly in retail settings while empirically, neutralization has only been applied to investigate quite extreme 'criminal' behavior (Strutton et al. 1994, 1997) or more obliquely, as an explanation for reported unethical behavior (Mitchell and Chan 2002) and in relation to anomie and subsequent fraudulent behavior

(Rosenbaum and Kuntze 2003). More recently, an exploratory study has illustrated the theory's applicability in a wider array of consumer ethical choices (Chatzidakis et al. 2004). Thus, the usefulness of the concept is recognized but, to date, no attempt has been made to carefully examine and relate neutralization's theoretical tenets with existing theories of ethical consumer behavior.

### **COPING WITH UNETHICAL CONSUMPTION: A PLACE FOR NEUTRALIZATION?**

The need for neutralization assumes that behavior violates social norms. Yet, in many instances, the contemporary ethical dilemmas facing consumers do not involve the violation of conventional or universal social norms (Reiss 1951; Sartorius 1972) to which neutralization theory was originally applied. For example, there is not an absolute norm that "one ought to buy fair trade products". Nevertheless, as an arena of behavior, consumer activities offer the opportunity for the expression of a wide range of norm types (Grove et al. 1989).<sup>2</sup> Failure to behave ethically may involve the violation of different group norms (Bettenhausen and Murnighan 1985; March 1954) or subcultural norms (Yinger 1960) or, what Jackson et al. (1993) describe as "felt" norms. It is these felt norms that affect activities such as recycling and buying fair trade products. People may also make individual ethical judgments (e.g. Beauchamp and Bowie 1988; Sartorius 1972), as neither all non-normative behaviors are unethical nor all unethical behaviors normative (e.g. Beauchamp and Bowie 1988; Strutton et al. 1997). Individuals may view certain consumer choices as wrong for themselves, but not necessarily wrong for others (Baron 1999). Nonetheless, even these individual judgments may be violated in some circumstances. In sum, it is important to recognise the nature of the norms relevant to particular consumption contexts, but neutralization can nevertheless be used in any circumstance in which a consumer has a desire to commit (or has committed) a questionable activity but has an ethical concern that requires neutralization (Minor 1981, 300-301).

The relative negligence of neutralization theory to account for how people cope with dissonance in ethical decision contexts is not surprising given that its origins are sociological (see Eagly and Chaiken 1993). Nonetheless, the potential usefulness of neutralization theory in this domain (Minor 1984; Hazani 1991) stems from the fact that it is a well-established and relatively comprehensive conceptual framework, which describes and predicts which self-justification strategies may be employed as a defense against dissonance and feelings of guilt consumers might otherwise experience when violating their internalized norms and values. Therefore, it represents a psychological process capable of restoring equilibrium without attitude change.

Despite its sociological origins, neutralization shares similar theoretical tenets with recent advances in psychology. For example, in opposition to the more traditional social cognition models, which assume a rational and unbiased consumer, proponents of motivated cognition argue that an individual's motives on a particular occasion bias reasoning processes and the resultant judgments. A number of studies (e.g. Kunda 1990; Ditto et al. 1998; Baumeister 1996) have made a strong case to suggest that directional goals, as opposed to accuracy goals, "may affect reasoning through reliance on a biased set of cognitive processes: strategies for accessing, constructing and evaluating beliefs" (Kunda 1990, 480). Similarly, one of the dominant models within persuasion and attitude change, i.e. the heuristic-systematic model (Chaiken 1980, 1987; Chaiken,

Liberman, and Eagly 1989), assumes that three different types of motivation – accuracy, impression and defence – may affect the type (heuristic versus systematic) and final outcome of a certain information processing task. Indeed, even the mainstream attitude models themselves (e.g. Ajzen 1991; Eagly & Chaiken 1993; Fazio 1990), have been recently criticized for not incorporating explicit or at least adequate, motivational content (see Perugini and Bagozzi 2004).

The theoretical developments outlined above share similar ground with neutralization theory in that a range of enduring and situational motives affect the final behavioral outcome, but also the cognitive strategies deployed before and afterwards. Of course, neutralization is specifically concerned with ethical reasoning processes, where motives such as self-esteem maintenance and self-worth are of dominant importance. Moreover, although neutralization is likely to co-occur with other modes of reasoning and effortful cognitive processing, it should be particularly pertinent in cases where the motive is to maintain self-esteem as opposed to arriving at a valid ethical judgment (see e.g. Eagly and Chaiken 1993). The lack of effort devoted to many ethical decisions was highlighted by Irwin (1999, 212) who claimed that most individuals are unlikely to "incorporate a complex hedonic calculation of the greatest utility for society into (their) weekly supermarket trip". However, involvement can fluctuate as ethical concerns are continuously influenced by contingencies such as peer pressure and availability of information (Clarke 2004). Nevertheless, neutralization represents a very specific theoretical proposition, which is most easily applied to less deliberative decision making and describes and predicts which cognitive "heuristics" or strategies may be employed when there are motives to maintain self-worth and at the same time violate personal ethical beliefs and values. This relatively effortless mode of cognitive processing is most likely to occur in everyday, low-involvement contexts, where consumers downplay ethical considerations.

### **TOWARDS A MODEL OF "UNETHICAL" CONSUMER DECISION MAKING**

The foregoing discussion proposes that the cognitive process of neutralization can help consumers to cope with feelings of guilt or dissonance when their behavior in ethical contexts is not consistent with their beliefs and attitudes. The ensuing model and discussion elaborate on how neutralization complements existing models of ethical decision making, thus moving towards a model of unethical consumer decision making.

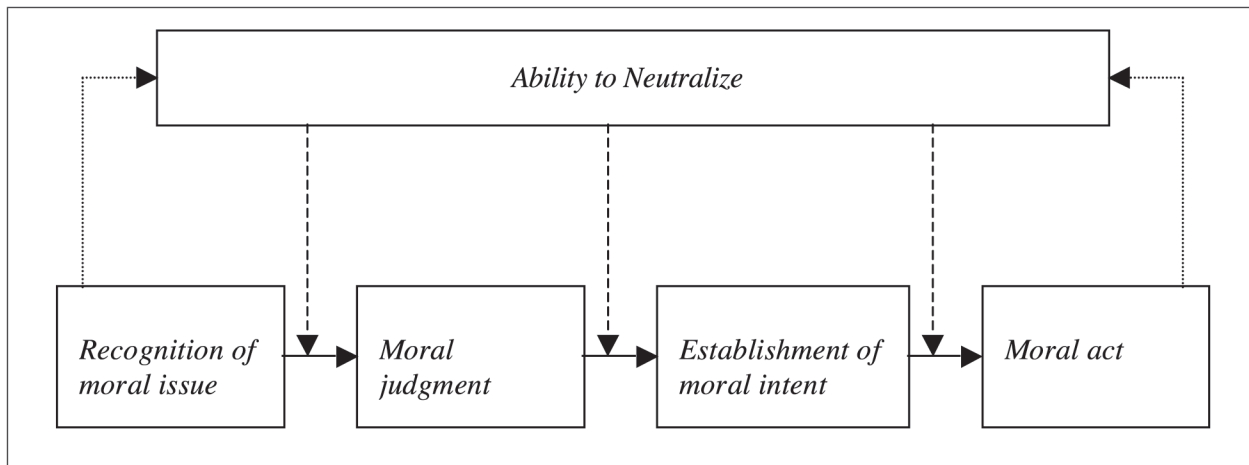
Figure 1 depicts the basic four-stage model of ethical decision making advanced by Rest (1979). This model is consistent with the core elements of many subsequent models on ethical decision-making (e.g. Hunt and Vitell 1986; Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Tan 2002), which focus on one or more of the stages outlined (for an overview, see Jones 1991). Thus, we adopt this model here for the sake of simplicity and comparability.

Rest's model proposes that in the ethical decision process an individual must a) recognize the moral issue, b) make a moral judgment, c) resolve to place moral concerns ahead of other concerns, and d) act on the moral concerns. Each of these stages is conceptually distinct and success at one stage does not imply success in subsequent stages. We propose that individuals can bring to bear neutralization techniques between each and/or every stage of the ethical decision process to mitigate potential dissonance and feelings of guilt. The hypotheses presented below detail the proposed moderating effect of a person's ability to neutralize between each stage of the process.

At the beginning of the process, an individual recognises that there is a moral dimension to the decision. In the process of making

<sup>2</sup>Grove et al. (1989, 132), refer to three different norm types, i.e. "folkways", mores and laws.

**FIGURE 1**  
The Influence of Ability to Neutralize on the Ethical Decision Process



a moral judgment on the issue, the degree to which a person considers it acceptable, if not right, to deviate from the relevant norm or value will be influenced by his or her ability to apply neutralization techniques to the situation. For example, within the domain of consumer ethics (e.g. acknowledging being given the wrong change), it has been widely documented that beliefs about whether the consumer or the seller is at fault underlie consumer moral judgments (Fukukawa 2002). Vitell and Muncy (1992) have linked this type of rationalisation to the neutralization techniques of "condemning the condemners" and "denial of victim".

H1: Where an individual recognises that there is a moral dimension to a decision, the ability to neutralize will have a negative effect on moral judgments (attitudes) and will make unethical alternatives more acceptable

When a moral judgment or attitude towards the ethical issue has been formed, a consumer does not necessarily establish an intention to pursue what s/he perceives to be a morally superior course of action because other competing concerns/desired consequences sometimes take priority (e.g. Hunt and Vitell 1986). In such cases, neutralization techniques can serve as self-defence mechanisms that mitigate the virtues of ethically superior choices. For example, a consumer may have shaped an ethical judgment in favour of recycling. At the same time however, s/he may not be willing to undergo the inconvenience of keeping separate bins, driving to the recycling station and so on. By employing neutralization techniques such as "no one else is doing it in the neighbourhood" or "it is the council's responsibility for not having a better infrastructure in place", s/he can avoid dissonance or feelings of guilt that might otherwise arise due to the inconsistency between his/her moral judgments and intended behavior.

H2: When a moral judgment is in favor of ethically superior choices, the ability to neutralize will a) increase the likelihood that a consumer will form inconsistent moral intentions and b) reduce the likelihood that an individual will experience dissonance or guilty feelings.

Even if the consumer has established an intention to pursue an ethically superior course of action, situational constraints or the existence of an opportunity might affect actual behavior (Ferrell and

Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1992). Again, the techniques can guard against any feelings of guilt or dissonance that might arise due to the inconsistency. For example, a consumer may be willing to pay a higher price for fairly traded goods but when s/he goes to the supermarket the fair trade brand is out of stock. Similarly, an individual may have no intention to engage in any sort of consumer "transgressions", but when s/he is undercharged in a large chain retail store, s/he may "overlook" the incident. In both cases, techniques such as attributing responsibility to the retailer and claiming that "no one else would do it" can effectively guard against the anticipation of feelings such as remorse or shame, and thus smooth the process of not acting on previously established moral intentions.

H3: When moral intentions are in favour of more ethical choices the ability to neutralize will a) increase the likelihood that a consumer will submit to situational constraints or opportunities that inhibit him or her from acting upon those positive intentions and b) reduce the likelihood that an individual will experience dissonance or feelings of guilt.

Actual (unethical) behavior might lead to the employment of neutralization techniques on a *post hoc* basis, indicating the consumer's sensitivity to its unethical nature and becoming part of his/her experience. If successful, the techniques might be internalized and thus they will affect the recognition of an ethical issue in subsequent decisions on an *ad hoc* basis. That is, if they have become genuine neutralizing devices, on similar occasions in the future an individual will not consider there to be a moral dimension to the problem (Vitell and Grove 1987; Grove et al. 1989). Indeed, by making the unexpected expected, the untoward either justified or inconsequential, neutralization techniques essentially make things "right" (Massey, Freeman, and Zelditch 1997, 238).

H4: The use of neutralization techniques following behavior (if successfully internalized) will reduce the likelihood that a consumer will recognize a moral dimension to a similar problem in the future.

Following Vitell and Grove's (1987) related endeavor in the business ethics field, it is further proposed that both the type of

ethical problem and various background characteristics of the consumer act as moderating variables upon the proposed relationships between the “ability to neutralize” and (un)ethical behavior. While some indications of possible interrelationships already exist in the literature (for type of ethical problem see e.g. Strutton et al. 1994; Chatzidakis et al. 2004; for individual characteristics see e.g. Strutton et al. 1997; Holland et al. 2002), a further elaboration on those issues would move beyond the purpose of this paper, which is to illustrate how the techniques may affect any of the basic steps in the consumer’s ethical decision-making process.

The proposed construct can be readily added in the context of Hunt and Vitell’s (1986, 1992) general theory in marketing ethics since it is based in all steps of Rest’s ethical decision-making process and also accounts for moderating or exogenous factors. Furthermore, it can also be adjusted in the context of theory of planned behavior. It can represent a new construct, in the same way that Fukukawa (2002) argued for “perceived unfairness”, and Shaw and Shiu (2002a, 2002b) for “ethical obligation” and “self identity”; thus affecting attitude, behavioral intention as well as behavior. Clearly however, those conceptualization issues await future investigation.

### CONCLUSIONS

Neutralization theory offers to significantly complement existing knowledge of ethical consumer behavior by outlining ways in which consumers can mitigate the negative impact of their ethically questionable activities. In addition to the theoretical contribution of neutralization theory to understanding unethical consumer behavior, the arguments and hypotheses advanced in this paper, if empirically verified, have implications for both public policy and marketing practice. Most notably, given an understanding of how consumers use neutralization techniques to justify pursuing their more selfish goals in particular contexts, marketing communications and persuasion activities can be designed to counter the arguments that consumers use to justify unethical choices. Investigations into which neutralization techniques are mostly employed to justify, for example, shoplifting, drink driving or declining to give to charity, could provide the basis for initiatives that seek to manipulate, negate and pre-empt the deployment of those techniques in particular (e.g. Strutton et al. 1994, 1997). In relation to shoplifting, statements such as “everybody loses from shoplifting” and “shoplifting does make a difference because at the end it increases the final cost for the consumer” may work against the “denial of injury” neutralization technique. Yet, more research is needed to empirically validate all of the hypotheses advanced and to identify the more effective approaches to communication. For example, while it is possible that communication attempts that target at disrupting a cognitive adaptation (via neutralization techniques) will ultimately lead to behavioral adaptation (via more ethical behavior; Peretti-Wattel 2003), it is also possible that consumers may counterbalance it by inventing a series of new neutralizing beliefs (Minor 1981).

Furthermore this research can have important implications for the lives of consumers. Awareness and understanding of how individuals use neutralization techniques could provide valuable insights for consumers on their own everyday behavior. A more critical stance on the ethical rationalizations that consumers intuitively employ in so many daily consumer contexts could perhaps be powerful enough to uplift change. For example, being aware of the widespread employment of certain neutralization techniques, a consumer would probably think twice about whether his own internal dialogues concern real expressions of situational or utilitarian ethics or somewhat self-deceptive “excuses” (see Bersoff 2001, 1999). Is it sensible and valid to argue that “I do not recycle paper

because the council does not provide a collection service”, or is it the case that we have a responsibility to recycle the waste produced through our consumption, even if doing so is not as convenient as we would like? It has been suggested that relatively small, non-duress driven social breaches are likely to be the most strongly influenced by self-presentation and self-esteem needs, and indeed, these are the types of questionable behaviors that are the most common (Bersoff 2001). Recognising and readdressing some of these minor violations may have positive consequences for consumers in terms of their freedom from guilt and peace of mind as well as broader societal benefits.

### REFERENCES

- Due to space constraints, the full list of references is available from the first author upon request.*
- Baron, J. (1999). Consumer Attitudes About Personal and Political Action. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 8(3), 261-275.
- Bersoff, D. M. (2001). Why Good People Sometimes Do Bad Things: Motivated Reasoning and Unethical Behaviour. *The Next Phase of Business Ethics*, 3, 239-262.
- Carrigan, M., & Attalla, A. (2001). The Myth of the Ethical Consumer- Do Ethics Matter in Purchase Behavior? *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 560-577.
- Chatzidakis, A., Hibbert, S., Mitussis, D., & Smith, A. (2004). Virtue in Consumption? *Journal of Marketing Management*, 20 (5/6), 526-543.
- Cooper-Martin, E., & Holbrook, M. B. (1993). Ethical Consumption Experiences and Ethical Space. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 113-118.
- Davies, J. D., Foxall, G. R., & Pallister, J. (2002). Beyond the Intention-Behaviour Mythology: An integrated Model of Recycling. *Marketing Theory*, 2(1), 29-113.
- Eagly, A. H., & Chaiken, S. (1993). *The Psychology of Attitudes*. Fort Worth: TX: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Fukukawa, K. (2002). Developing a Framework for Ethically Questionable Behaviour in Consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 14, 99-119.
- Fullerton, R. A., & Punj, G. (1993). Choosing to Misbehave: a Structural Model of Aberrant Consumer Behaviour. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 570-574.
- Grove, S. J., Vitell, S. J., & Strutton, D. (1989). Non-Normative Consumer Behaviour and the Techniques of Neutralization. *Proceedings of the 1989 AMA Winter Educators Conference*, 131-135.
- Holland, R. W., Meertens, R. M., & Van Vugt, M. (2002). Dissonance on the Road: Self-Esteem as a Moderator of Internal and External Justification Strategies. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(12), 1713-1724.
- Hunt, S. D., & Vitell, S. J. (1986). A General Theory of Marketing Ethics. *Journal of MacroMarketing*, 5-15.
- Irwin, J. R. (1999). Introduction to the Special Issue on Ethical Tradeoffs in Consumer Decision Making. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 8, 211-213.
- Jackson, L. A., Olsen, J. E., Granzin, K. L., & Burns, A. C. (1993). An Investigation of Determinants of Recycling Consumer Behaviour. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 20, 481-487.
- Jones, T. M. (1991). Ethical Decision Making by Individuals in Organizations: An Issue Contingent Model. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(2), 366-395.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The Case for Motivated Reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480-498.

- Marks, L. J., & Mayo, M. A. (1991). An Empirical Test of a Model of Consumer Ethical Dilemmas. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 18, 720-728.
- Massey, K., Freeman, S., & Zelditch, M. (1997). Status, Power and Accounts. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60(3), 238-251.
- Minor, W. W. (1981). Techniques of Neutralization: A Reconceptualization and Empirical Examination. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, July, 295-318.
- Mitchell, V.-W., & Chan, K. L. J. (2002). Investigating UK Consumers' Unethical Attitudes and Behaviours. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 18, 5-26.
- Nebenzahl, I. D., Jaffe, E. D., & Kavak, B. (2001). Consumer's Punishment and rewarding Process Via Purchasing Behaviour. *Teaching Business Ethics*, 5, 283-305.
- Peretti-Watel, P. (2003). Neutralization Theory and the Denial of Risk: Some Evidence from Cannabis Use among French Adolescents. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(1), 21-42.
- Perugini, M., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2004). An Alternative View of Pre-Volitional Processes in Decision Making: Conceptual Issues and Empirical Evidence. In G. Haddock & G. R. Maio (Eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on the Psychology of Attitudes* (pp. 169-201). Hove UK: Psychology Press.
- Rest, J. R. (1979). *Development in Judging Moral Issues*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rosenbaum, M. S., & Kuntze, R. (2003). The Relationship Between Anomie and Unethical Retail Disposition. *Psychology & Marketing*, 20(12), 1067-1093.
- Shaw, D., & Clarke, I. (1999). Belief Formation in Ethical Consumer Groups: An Exploratory Study. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 17(2), 109-119.
- Shaw, D., & Newholm, T. (2002). Voluntary Simplicity and the Ethics of Consumption. *Psychology & Marketing*, 19(2), 167-185.
- Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2002). An Assessment of Ethical Obligation and Self-Identity in Ethical Consumer Decision-Making: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 26(4), 286-293.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2002). The Role of Ethical Obligation and Self-Identity in Ethical Consumer Choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 26(2), 109-116.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2003). Ethics in Consumer Choice: A Multivariate Modelling Approach. *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(10), 1485-1498.
- Shaw, D., Shiu, E., & Clarke, I. (2000). The Contribution of Ethical Obligation and Self-Identity to the Theory of Planned Behaviour: An Exploration of Ethical Consumers. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 16, 879-894.
- Singhapakdi, A., Rawwas, M., Marta, J., & Ahmed, M. I. (1999). A Cross-Cultural Study of Consumer Perceptions about Marketing Ethics. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 16(3), 257-272.
- Strutton, D., Pelton, L. E., & Ferrell, O. C. (1997). Ethical Behaviour in Retail Settings: Is There a Generation Gap? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 16, 87-105.
- Strutton, D., Vitell, S. J., & Pelton, L. E. (1994). How Consumers May Justify Inappropriate Behavior in Market Settings: An Application on the Techniques of Neutralization. *Journal of Business Research*, 30, 253-260.
- Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). "Techniques of Neutralization: A theory of Delinquency". *American Sociological Review*, 22(6), 664-670.
- Tan, B. (2002). Understanding Consumer Ethical Decision Making with Respect to Purchase of Pirated Software. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 19(2), 96-111.
- Vitell, S. J. (2003). Consumer Ethics Research: Review, Synthesis and Suggestions for the Future. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 43, 33-47.
- Vitell, S. J., & Grove, S. J. (1987). Marketing Ethics and the Techniques of Neutralization. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 6, 433-438.
- Vitell, S. J., & Muncy, J. (1992). Consumer Ethics: An empirical investigation of Factors Influencing Ethical Judgments of the Final Consumer. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 11, 585-597.
- Vitell, S. J., Singhapakdi, A., & Thomas, J. (2001). Consumer Ethics: An Application and Empirical Testing of the Hunt-Vitell Theory of Ethics. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(2), 153-178.