

Chapter 15

Ethically Questionable Behavior and Consumerism in Uganda: A Survey of University Students

Isaac Wasswa Katono
Uganda Christian University, Uganda

ABSTRACT

While consumerism seems to be on the rise in many societies, little attempt has been made to link consumerism to unethical behavior and its antecedents namely work ethic and perceived unfairness. The purpose of this study is to compare female and male perceptions of work ethic, unethical behavior and consumerism, and use this as a basis to examine whether unethical behavior and its antecedents explain consumerism in an emerging market context where consumer protection is at a minimum. Based on a cross sectional survey research design, this study uses valid measures from previous studies to collect data from a systematic sample of students from a large private university. Findings indicate that women and male students do not differ much on most of the items on the three scales. Further the study finds a direct link between perceived unfairness, unethical behavior and consumerism, while work ethic and consumerism are mediated by unethical behavior. Implications for government and business organizations are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Consumerism and consumption are central activities in many societies today (Shah, 2014), and in many nations consumption has moved beyond the basics of life to include luxury and other technological innovations that simplify life. A consumerist society is defined as one largely directed by the accumulation and consumption of material goods (O'Shaughnessy & O' Shaughnnessy, 2002), with people in such societies thinking much of themselves and very little of others (Lee et al, 2009). It can be said in general that peoples' consumption patterns and the purpose of this consumption influence how they extract resources, manufacture and market products and eventually produce pollution and waste (Shah, 2014). Hence along with consumerism are positive impacts as well as obvious negative effects like environmental

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degradation. However the gist of the matter is: what factors influence consumerism? Extant marketing literature (Lee, Pant & Ali, 2009) postulates that unethical behavior in the market place gives rise to consumerism, while this unethical behavior is itself bred by a poor work ethic and perceived unfairness in the market place among other factors. Based on earlier workers like Ali and Wisniesk (2010) as well as Fukukawa and Ennew (2010), this study examines the link between antecedents to unethical behavior (work ethic and perceived unfairness), and consumerism in Uganda using a sample of university students. The study seeks to address the key question “does ethically questionable behavior influence consumerism in the market place in this country?”

Marketing and Consumerism

Current marketing practices have been accused of creating a consumerist or materialistic society (Abela, 2006), though other authors such as O’Shaughnessy and O’ Shaughnnessy (2002) provide a spirited discourse in defense of marketing. As stated above, consumerism is associated with many negative effects to individuals and society. To elaborate, consumerism is associated with reduced consumer well being, particularly in terms of home relationships and levels of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) among other negative effects. Marketing theorists argue that there may be a causal link between materialism and well being, by suggesting that materialism involves a reversal of priorities by consumers giving up values and behaviors that tend to be associated with greater satisfaction, in favor of those associated with less satisfaction (Abela, 2006). Specifically Ahuvia and Wong (2002) posit that materialism prioritizes lower order needs over high order needs, resulting in lower levels of satisfaction. In support of this view, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) contend that individualistic orientation of materialistic values conflicts with collective oriented values such as family or religion. Such a conflict ends up in tension, resulting in a reduced sense of well being. In further support of the relationship between marketing and the growth of materialism, it has been established that there exists a causal link between advertising and materialism, and several studies have associated TV watching and TV advertising with high levels of materialism among children (Kinsey, 1987).

On the other hand and at a national level, consumerism as an ideology that celebrates consumption and spending in a society with less production capacity (as is the case in many developing countries like Uganda), may constitute a threat to future development and strengthen the dependency on imports (Ali & Wisniesk, 2010). Consumerism in Uganda is evidenced in the central region where people sell their land indiscriminately to buy luxurious cars, expensive clothing, and expensive phones, build large houses, motorcycles and so on. As explained in the next section, two major antecedents of ethically questionable behavior that are not in short supply in Uganda, are a poor work ethic and perceived unfairness emanating from lack of a consumer protection policy/law in the country. These two variables could possibly be associated with the consumerist attitude currently reigning in this country.

Consumerism and Unethical Behavior

There is need for both marketers and buyers to be ethical in their conduct, for the efficient and effective running of the market place (Fullerton et al, 1996). Unethical behavior on the part of either of them disrupts the relationship and gives rise to exchanges that are both “unproductive and ineffective” (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Ethical consumer behavior can be defined as “decision making purchases and other consumption experiences, which are affected by the consumers’ ethical concerns” (Cooper-Martin

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