

Understanding Consumers' Ethical Justifications: A Scale for Appraising Consumers' Reasons for Not Behaving Ethically

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ABSTRACT. This article reports the results of research aimed at developing and validating a multi-item scale to measure consumers' agreement with three main justifications for not engaging in socially responsible consumption (SRC) behaviours, namely the 'economic rationalist argument' founded on the idea that the costs of SRC are greater than its benefits, the 'economic development reality argument' based on the idea that ethical and moral aspirations are less important than the economic development of countries, and the 'government dependency argument' grounded in the premise that government inaction demonstrates the legal character and the banality of unethical consumption behaviours. The scale items were generated on the basis of a multi-country qualitative study of consumers (Eckhardt et al., 2006, 'Why Don't Consumers Behave Ethically'. DVD Document, AGSM). The content validity of the scale was assessed in the first study. The second study was a survey of 157 Canadian adult consumers in which the three-dimensional scale and other scales measuring relevant concepts were administered. The survey results showed that the 28-item resulting scale is reliable and generally behaves as one would theoretically expect. Implications for consumption ethics researchers and policy makers are proposed.

KEY WORDS: consumer ethics, socially responsible consumption, unethical consumer behaviour

Introduction

Hardly a day goes without one hearing or reading some story that bears on environmental protection, child labour and the conditions of factory workers in developing countries, or the use of animals for testing consumer products. Ethical and social issues

like these have become the major preoccupation in our society and, consequently, more and more companies engage in and actively promote their socially responsible behaviours. For instance, Starbucks Coffee Company has adopted an environmental mission statement that promotes sustainable coffee production (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; see also www.starbucks.com). Other examples include the manufacture of clothing from natural textiles made of bamboo, sea cells and soya, and the marketing of hybrid automobiles.

Response to society's ethical concerns also come from consumers who always want to be informed about how the products they buy are made and who benefit from their purchases (Bird and Hughes, 1997). Consumer boycotts of companies like Shell and Nestlé and the resulting financial losses (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001) attest to the impact of consumer social responsibility on business practices.

Studies have shown that consumers have developed favourable attitudes towards ethical products and companies with socially responsible practices (e.g. Billock, 2004; Dawkins, 2004) and they believe that they have the power to change companies' behaviours (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). It has also been demonstrated that some consumers, in some situations, are willing to pay a price premium in order to buy ethical products (Blend and Van Ravenswaay, 1999; Loureiro et al., 2002; Maietta, 2003; Trudel and Cotte, 2008). However, there appears to be a significant difference between what consumers say about the importance of consumption-related ethical issues and their actual behaviour, as the overall market share of ethical products and brands remain fairly low, i.e. <2% (Doane, 2001;

Transfair USA, 2005), and consumers admit that they often behave unethically (Eckhardt et al., 2006). This consumer 'attitude-behaviour gap' with respect to ethical issues (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2004) has been noted by several researchers (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrigan et al., 2004; Devinney et al., 2006; Fan, 2005; Roberts, 1996; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004).

Given this context, the objective of this research is to take a look at the justifications invoked by consumers for not behaving ethically with respect to their consumption activities. This research falls into one of the two realms of business ethics identified by O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005), namely 'descriptive (or empirical) ethics', which pertains to the explanation and the prediction of people's behaviour. More precisely, it is concerned with the identification and measurement of common justifications that people invoke for not exhibiting socially responsible consumption (SRC) behaviours.

The article is organised as follows. First, the literature on ethical consumption is examined in order to identify the major justifications for exhibiting unethical consumer behaviour. Following this, the results of two studies aimed at developing and validating a scale for measuring these justifications are presented. The article concludes with some implications for researchers and policy makers interested in SRC issues.

Justifications for unethical consumer behaviour

Several researchers have suggested that consumers are more motivated by self-interest than by the interests of society and that the adoption of SRC behaviours would be favoured if such behaviours led to concrete positive benefits for them. According to this point of view, consumers agree that companies must engage in socially responsible practices but they refuse to assume the possible consequences, namely higher prices (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Page and Fearn, 2005), lower quality (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) and wasted time (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Although consumers say that they are willing to pay more to buy ethical products, the majority do so only if functional product attributes are preserved (Devinney et al., 2006); i.e. few con-

sumers agree to trade basic functional attributes for socially acceptable attributes (Auger et al., 2006, 2008).

Consumers may also foresee some negative consequences resulting from socially responsible behaviours. These consequences, which generally take the form of additional effort, are likely to affect their overall satisfaction and consequently their willingness to adopt ethical consumption behaviours (Follows and Jobber, 2000). For instance, the perceived additional efforts associated with recycling have been shown to have a negative impact on intention to recycle (Dahab et al., 1995) and on recycling behaviour itself (Thøgersen and Grunert-Beckman, 1997).

From another perspective, some researchers have argued that consumers are prone to blame others, in particular governments, for their unethical consumption behaviours. For instance, Sheng et al. (1994) report that Taiwanese do not tend to recognise their individual responsibility with respect to their country's environmental problems, unless they are constrained by law. Strutton et al. (1994) have shown that consumers tend to invoke generally accepted value justifications in order to reduce their culpability and maintain their self-concept in the face of unethical behaviours, like denying one's responsibility because of uncontrollable factors.

Consumers may be tempted to transfer the responsibility for their unethical behaviours to the government because of the strong relationship they perceive between illegal actions and lack of ethics (Vitell and Muncy, 1992). As they generally think that something which is legal is also ethical (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), consumers may simply conclude that it is the government's responsibility to prohibit their unethical behaviour and that, until this is done, behaving as they do is perfectly acceptable.

An interesting synthesis of the justifications that consumers invoke for behaving unethically (e.g. buying counterfeit products, buying products made by underpaid workers and buying non-ecological products) was provided by Eckhardt et al. (2006). These researchers conducted several interviews with consumers from seven countries (Australia, China, India, Spain, Sweden, Turkey and the USA) in order to identify consumers' reasons for not behaving ethically and to explore possible differences from one country to another. The results of their study were summarised in a video that contains the

researchers' interpretations and some representative excerpts from the series of interviews.

Eckhardt et al. (2006) argue that consumers are not ready to sacrifice their comfort and lifestyle for social causes. In contrast with what can be inferred from many surveys, consumers very rarely exhibit SRC behaviour. This tendency was observed among consumers from all countries. On the basis of their interviews, Eckhardt et al. (2006) conclude that there are three major reasons used by consumers to justify their unethical behaviours: economic rationalisation, the reality of economic development and government dependency.

Eckhardt et al. (2006) summarise the economic rationalist (ER) argument as "it is all about costs and benefits". In other words, consumers think that SRC is costly; they claim that price and quality are more important factors than ethical attributes. For instance, consumers admit that they buy counterfeit products and they do so because the price of original brands is excessive or even inflated. The economic traditionalist argument is consistent with Auger et al. (2003) and Follows and Jobber (2000) who claim that consumers do not buy socially responsible products because of the additional costs involved.

The economic development reality (ED) argument is summarised as "this is the way the world develops and one has to go with the flow" (Eckhardt et al., 2006). That is, consumers believe that the economic development of countries fully justifies the adoption of unethical behaviours. In their opinion, in order for countries to benefit from economic growth and to reach a decent standard of living, it is necessary to put aside ethical and moral aspirations. This argument is consistent with Hartmann and Apaolaza Ibanez (2006) who pointed out that economic growth and its impacts on the environment discourage the initiatives of consumers and producers. It is also consistent with what Stone et al. (1995) see as the major concern of the American society, namely the manner in which social and environmental issues hamper economic development.

The government dependency (GD) argument goes like this: "if it were really that bad, the government would do something" (Eckhardt et al., 2006). In line with this argument, consumers think that where there are no laws regulating the unethical actions of social actors, their behaviour is legal and they cannot be blamed for it. Moreover, govern-

ments' inaction proves that there is no cause for alarm. In the end, consumers blame some third party, principally the government. This perspective reflects a general tendency to consider that what is legal is acceptable from a social point of view (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), a tendency that inevitably discourages consumers from adopting ethical or socially responsible behaviours.

Method

As it is consistent with the literature that has directly or indirectly examined consumers' reasons for not behaving ethically and because it is based on consumer interviews conducted in several countries, which gives it some degree of generalisability, Eckhardt et al.'s (2006) justification typology was adopted as the conceptual framework of this research. Two studies were conducted to develop a scale aimed at measuring the three arguments identified by Eckhardt et al. (2006), namely economic rationalisation, the reality of economic development and government dependency.

Study 1

The objective of this first study was to produce a set of statements to serve in the development of a measuring instrument to assess the extent to which consumers agree with the three arguments. The Eckhardt et al. (2006) video was listened several times and all the interviewees' responses were transcribed in full. The resulting written document provided the data based on which a first set of 27 statements was generated (8–10 statements per category).

Two Canadian adult consumers were recruited to give a first assessment of the statements. The judges worked independently. They were given a detailed description of each argument along with its respective statements. Their task was to examine each statement with respect to its convergence with the argument, its pertinence and its possible ambiguities. In addition, the judges were told to comment on any other aspect of the statements they deemed relevant. Following this, a few statements had to be modified because they were considered to be redundant or ambiguous.

Two different adult consumers were recruited to participate in a subsequent content validation task. The judges worked independently. They were given a detailed description of the arguments along with the set of 27 statements. Their task was to examine each statement and associate it with one of the three arguments. Following this, they had to indicate their level of confidence in the classification on a 5-point bipolar scale with endpoints *not at all certain* and *totally certain*. All statements were correctly classified by the judges (100% agreement) and all except one received a confidence score of 5. The statement which did not receive a perfect confidence score was eliminated.

The 26 statements were included in a questionnaire along with several other items aimed at measuring different concepts of interest (to be described later). A convenience sample of 16 adult consumers participated in a first pre-test of the questionnaire. They were asked to complete the questionnaire and to make all comments and suggestions they deemed relevant to improving it. Several ambiguities and inconsistencies were noted by the participants in the pre-test and many statements had to be reformulated accordingly. In particular, some statements associated with the ER argument were re-written in order to make them easier to understand and bring them more in-line with the concept. In addition, one statement associated with the ED argument and one associated with the ER argument were added in order to better represent these two dimensions. The final scale is therefore composed of 28 items (see Table I). After these changes, the questionnaire was pre-tested again with a convenience sample of 14 adult consumers. Following this second pre-test, a few minor modifications were made to the questionnaire.

Study 2

The objective of the second study was to assess the psychometric qualities of the 28-item consumer reasons for unethical behaviour (CRUB) scale. To accomplish this objective, a survey was conducted among a sample of 157 Canadian adult consumers. In addition to the CRUB scale, the survey questionnaire included different scales aimed at measuring various concepts for the purpose of scale validation.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was composed of six sections. In the first section, six items were used to assess the participant's knowledge of SRC (e.g. "I know pretty much about socially responsible consumption"). A 7-point numerical bipolar scale with endpoints *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* was provided for each statement (the same response procedure was used for all scales discussed below). Prior to showing the items, SRC was defined as 'the consumption of ecological products or products that are made under decent working conditions'. The six-item scale was adapted from an instrument developed by Flynn and Goldsmith (1999) to measure one's subjective knowledge in the context of consumer studies. This particular scale was chosen because it has good psychometric properties, is easy to use and is applicable to a variety of objects.

In the second section, consumer involvement in SRC was measured with the help of six items (e.g. "I worry more than most people about ethical issues that result from my consumption"). The items were adapted from a scale developed by Oliver and Bearden (1985) in the context of body weight. This scale was chosen because of its good reliability (reported Cronbach's alpha = 0.85), its simplicity and the ease with which it could be adapted to the SRC context.

The third section contained four items to measure the concept of perceived consumer effectiveness, i.e. consumers' perception that their actions can make a difference and may help to solve different ethical problems (see Kinnear et al., 1974). Two items from this scale were adapted from a scale developed by Berger and Corbin (1992) that puts the emphasis on consumer resignation (e.g. "I feel powerless with regard to my real impact on problems as important as the environment and the respect of workers"). Two additional items were designed specifically for this study in order to tap the action dimension of perceived consumer effectiveness (see De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; e.g. "I am confident that by adopting socially responsible consumption behaviours, I will concretely change the fate of workers and that of the environment").

The fourth section contained 18 items intended to measure the extent to which people concretely engage in SRC behaviours. The scale, which was adapted from an multi-item instrument developed

TABLE I
The consumer reasons for unethical behaviour (CRUB) scale

Reality of economic development

I do not boycott companies that are established in countries where labor is cheaper, because they contribute to the development of these countries' economy – **ED1**

It is normal for developing countries to have companies that do not respect the environment entirely; I will not boycott them for that – **ED2**

There is nothing wrong with buying products made by underpaid workers; this is the price to pay for the development of their country – **ED3**

When I buy products made in poor countries, I do not worry about the working conditions in which they were made, because what counts is the economic development of these countries – **ED4**

The idea of buying products made by underpaid workers does not worry me, because this encourages the growth of developing countries – **ED5**

I believe that companies' lack of respect for the environment is a necessary evil to encourage a country's economic growth – **ED6**

I do not blame companies for their non-ecological behaviour, because the economic development of their country requires that they act like this – **ED7**

I understand that growing companies engage in non-socially responsible actions because this is the natural way of doing things – **ED8**

Government dependency

Non-ecological products are not dangerous, because if they were the government would not allow companies to use ingredients that are harmful to the environment – **GD1**

I would not change my buying habits in order to be more ecological, because it is the government's role to force companies to conform to environmental standards – **GD2**

I do not have to feel bad when buying products made by underpaid workers; after all, it is up to the government to force companies to pay their workers adequately – **GD3**

As long as the government does not provide environmental guidelines, I consider that there is nothing wrong with buying non-ecological products – **GD4**

I would not refrain from buying products made by underpaid workers given that their selling is authorized by the government – **GD5**

If workers in poor countries were really unhappy, these countries' governments would set minimum salary and working conditions – **GD6**

There is nothing wrong with buying non-biodegradable products, because they are authorized by the government – **GD7**

I see no problem in buying products made by underpaid workers, since the government allows their sale – **GD8**

Non-ecological products are not really dangerous for the environment, because if they were the government would prohibit them – **GD9**

I do not really worry about the conditions under which products that I buy are made, because I feel that the government has to do it – **GD10**

Economic rationalisation

I do not like the idea of paying more for ecological products – **ER1**

I am willing to buy biodegradable products, but not at any price – **ER2**

I do not see why I should have to pay more for socially responsible products – **ER3**

Although I am sensitive to the conditions under which the products that I buy are made, their cost remains a very important factor – **ER4**

If I compare the price of a product and the fact that it is ecological, I lean naturally toward the price – **ER5**

I am willing to buy products made by underpaid workers if they are less expensive – **ER6**

I have no problem with buying counterfeit products (product copies sold on the black market), because I find that the price of real brands is excessive – **ER7**

I like the idea of making a good deal in buying counterfeit products (product copies sold on the black market) – **ER8**

I pay more attention to the price of products that I buy than to their ecological and/or ethical aspects – **ER9**

I prefer to buy counterfeit products (product copies sold on the black market) at very low prices than buying real brands at an excessive price – **ER10**

by François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2006), consists of five dimensions, namely socially responsible actions related to: (1) company behaviour (five items – e.g. “In general, concerning companies which make the products that I buy, I try concretely... not to buy products from companies or retailers that are linked to illegal organizations”), (2) buying cause-related products (two items – e.g. “In general, concerning the products that I buy, I try concretely... to buy products for which a portion of the price paid goes to a human or environmental cause”), (3) small businesses [four items – e.g. “In general, concerning my buying places, I try concretely... to buy in small stores (bread, meat, books...) as often as possible”], (4) buying locally made products (four items – e.g. “In general, concerning the geographical origin of products, I try concretely... to choose a Canadian product rather than a product made elsewhere”) and (5) amount of consumption (three items – e.g. “In general, concerning my amount of consumption, I try concretely... to limit my consumption to items that I really need”). Because the François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2006) scale was developed and tested in France, several adjustments in the vocabulary had to be made to fit the Canadian context.

The 28-item CRUB scale appeared in the fifth section of the questionnaire while the last section of the questionnaire contained standard socio-demographic questions (gender, age, annual family income, education and occupation).

Data collection

Two data collection methods were used for the survey. In the first phase, two middle-size cities (i.e. about 50,000 inhabitants) were chosen. A number of streets were selected from the residential areas of each city and interviewers knocked the door of every dwelling in those streets. They explained the objective of the study to the residents and gave appropriate instructions, then left the questionnaire with the person and picked it up the following day or at a more convenient time. Special efforts were made to secure the participation of men and women in about equal proportions.

This first data collection proved to be quite difficult. A total of 430 homes were visited, but there was no answer in 225 cases and 92 people refused to participate. Finally, 104 questionnaires from the 113

questionnaires that were left was used for analysis. In order to get additional responses, a convenient data collection method had to be employed. Questionnaires were sent to different adult consumers known to the authors who were invited to complete one and distribute the rest to other people that they knew. This resulted in 53 additional completed questionnaires.

Results

Sample description

The sample consisted of 157 adult consumers mainly of French-Canadian origin (94.3%) with a greater proportion of female respondents (63.1%). The age category in which there was greater number of respondents is 25–34 years (33.8%), although there were respondents in all age groups (minimum = 18, maximum = 82, mean = 41.2-years old). All education levels are well represented: 28%, secondary school or less; 22.9%, college and 36.9%, university. Most respondents were full-time workers (64.3%), 8.9% were students and 19.7% were retired.

Psychometric properties of the multi-item scales

The François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence (2006) SRC scale items were factor-analysed in order to see whether the five-factor conceptual structure would emerge. As expected, a five-factor solution yielded a pattern of factor loadings (after an orthogonal rotation) that was entirely consistent with the scale definition. The first factor explained 45.05% of the total variance (eigenvalue = 8.11) and was composed of the five company behaviour items (all loadings > 0.5; mean loading = 0.78; α = 0.87). The second factor explained 11.34% of the variance and included the four buying locally made product items (all loading > 0.5; mean loading = 0.81; α = 0.94). The third, fourth and fifth factors were associated with small business, amount of consumption and buying cause-related product items, respectively (all loadings > 0.5; mean loading = 0.73, 0.80 and 0.79; α = 0.84, 0.83 and 0.87). Five SRC indices were created by computing the mean score of the corresponding items.

A factor analysis of the six knowledge items led to a single factor explaining 63.25% of the total variance. The mean of the items was therefore computed to create an index of participants' subjective knowledge about SRC ($\alpha = 0.88$). The five involvement items converged towards a single factor explaining 63.91% of the total variance. The mean of the items was computed to create an appropriate involvement index ($\alpha = 0.86$). The four perceived effectiveness items were factor-analysed which resulted in a single factor explaining 63.44% of the total variance. The mean of the items served as an index of consumer perceived effectiveness ($\alpha = 0.81$).

Factor analysis and stability tests for the CRUB scale

The 28 items of the CRUB scale were submitted to a factor analysis in order to see if the three-dimensional structure would emerge (Netemeyer et al., 2003). The number of factors was set at 3 and a Varimax rotation was used to facilitate the interpretation of the results. The first factor explained 37.42% (eigenvalue = 10.48) of the total variance, the second 10.15% (eigenvalue = 2.84) and the third 7.75% (eigenvalue = 2.17). As expected, all items loaded on their appropriate factor. All loadings except one were >0.50 . Table II presents the factor loadings after rotation, the mean and SD of all items, and the reliability index (Cronbach's alpha) associated with each dimension of the scale. As can be seen, the reliability indices of the sub-scales were very good, ranging from 0.84 to 0.94. For subsequent analyses, the mean values of the items was computed and served as an index for each dimension (the mean values are displayed in Table II as well).

The stability of the factor structure was checked by conducting separate factor analyses among males and females, younger (<40 -years old) and older (40 years and more) consumers, consumers less knowledgeable versus more knowledgeable about SRC (median split), consumers less involved versus more involved in social responsibility issues (median split), and consumers with a perception of lower versus greater self-effectiveness with respect to ethical and social problems (median split). In summary, although some differences in the resulting factor structures were observed, in most cases, subject to

the limits of the sample, they were fairly stable. A slightly greater number of factor structure anomalies were noted in the sub-sample of males and that of consumers more knowledgeable about SRC.

Validation analyses for the CRUB scale

The process of scale validation was initiated through a series of analyses involving the scale itself and the different concepts that were measured in the survey. The general idea was to assess the extent to which the scale behaves on the basis of what is theoretically expected (Nunnally, 1978).

Relative importance of justifications

Eckhardt et al. (2006) made the observation that in more individualist and capitalist societies like the United States and Australia, unethical consumption behaviours are more likely to be justified with economically based explanations whereas in more socialist societies, like Germany and Sweden, there is a greater tendency to blame the government. If this is true, then in this study the ER argument should receive the highest agreement mean, followed by the ED argument and the GD argument, in that order. This is because the data were collected in Canada, a capitalist country characterised by a high level of individualism (Hofstede, 1984). The pattern of means is indeed consistent with this explanation (see Table II). A repeated-measure analysis of variance (ANOVA) involving the means of the three CRUB sub-scales yielded a significant F -statistic ($F = 141.03$, $p < 0.001$), which revealed that the means were overall different. Pairwise comparisons in the context of this ANOVA model confirmed that the ER mean was significantly greater than the ED mean (mean difference = 1.01, $F = 124.72$, $p < 0.001$) and that the latter was greater than the GD mean (mean difference = 0.38, $F = 24.89$, $p < 0.001$). These results support Eckhardt et al.'s (2006) observation and provide empirical evidence for the scale's validity.

Socially responsible consumption

It seems theoretically reasonable to expect that the more consumers agree with different justifications for unethical consumption behaviours, the less likely they are to engage concretely in socially responsible

TABLE II
Factor structure and reliability results of the CRUB scale

Item ^a	Factor 1 (Government dependency)	Factor 2 (Economic rationalisation)	Factor 3 (Economic development)	Mean	SD
GD10	0.79	0.22	0.10	2.56	1.60
GD9	0.78	0.11	0.14	1.97	1.18
GD4	0.76	0.14	0.35	2.32	1.31
GD3	0.74	0.28	0.32	2.52	1.42
GD8	0.72	0.28	0.35	2.41	1.46
GD1	0.71	0.05	0.01	2.20	1.41
GD2	0.71	0.19	-0.07	2.57	1.58
GD6	0.69	0.07	0.21	2.00	1.43
GD7	0.66	0.13	0.31	2.15	1.32
GD5	0.64	0.33	0.31	2.76	1.63
ER10	-0.04	0.75	0.16	2.68	1.73
ER7	-0.09	0.74	0.12	2.71	1.86
ER8	0.06	0.71	0.15	2.25	1.65
ER1	0.25	0.67	0.07	4.46	1.78
ER2	0.19	0.64	0.10	5.01	1.67
ER4	0.22	0.63	0.10	5.18	1.43
ER6	0.24	0.62	0.27	3.59	1.69
ER9	0.34	0.59	0.33	3.59	1.70
ER5	0.41	0.54	0.24	3.96	1.77
ER3	0.35	0.53	0.07	3.94	1.79
ED3	0.11	0.07	0.79	2.75	1.52
ED5	0.37	0.22	0.75	2.65	1.42
ED4	0.24	0.16	0.74	2.89	1.42
ED2	0.01	0.14	0.65	2.82	1.54
ED1	0.04	0.19	0.64	4.38	1.58
ED7	0.42	0.08	0.53	2.13	1.30
ED8	0.49	0.03	0.51	2.13	1.37
ED6	0.26	0.20	0.43	2.10	1.50
Grand mean	2.35	3.74	2.73		
Cronbach's α	0.94	0.88	0.84		

^aThe correspondence with the items appears in Table I.

The loadings of the items with their appropriate factor appear in bold characters.

behaviours. In order to test this proposition, the product-moment correlations between the five SRC indices and the ER, ED and GD indices were estimated. The results shown in Table III are generally consistent with the theoretical proposition, as all correlations were negative as expected. However, the correlations involving the amount of consumption showed that SRC dimension failed to reach statistical significance. The reliability index of this SRC dimension is very good and its variance is of the same magnitude as the other SRC dimensions,

which eliminates a restricted-range explanation. Therefore, it appears that consumers are not likely to invoke ER, ED and GD arguments to justify their excessive consumption or their lack of frugality.

Knowledge and involvement

Knowledge about SRC is a variable that has received a great deal of attention from researchers. Many authors think that information about ethical consumption is lacking and that this may explain why many consumers do not behave in a socially

TABLE III
Correlations between the SRC and CRUB scales

SRC dimensions	Government dependency	Economic rationalisation	Economic development
Company behaviour	-0.22*	-0.34**	-0.23*
Cause-related products	-0.28**	-0.28**	-0.21*
Small businesses	-0.34**	-0.39**	-0.29**
Locally made products	-0.22*	-0.35**	-0.22*
Amount of consumption	-0.10 NS	-0.13 NS	-0.05 NS

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

NS, Not statistically significant.

responsible way (see e.g. Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence, 2006; Schlegelmich et al., 1996; Shaw et al., 2005; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004). For instance, Schlegelmich et al. (1996) argued that learning about the consequences of unethical consumption behaviours is essential in order to make appropriate consumption decisions. Similarly, Shaw et al. (2005) pointed out that information contributes to reinforcing one's capacity to make socially responsible choices. In a study involving 615 Belgian consumers, De Pelsmacker and Janssens (2007) showed that a greater knowledge about fair trade has a positive impact on the extent to which one is concerned about it and a negative impact on scepticism. This in turn was shown to influence product interest and, ultimately, buying behaviour.

The more consumers know about ethical consumption, the more they feel concerned about it (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007). Consumers who adopt SRC behaviours are also likely to know more about ecological, environmental and ethical issues since they get hands-on experience, become familiar with such issues, and therefore develop their expertise (Alba and Hutchinson, 1987). In addition,

the greater their involvement in SRC, the more likely they will search for and pay attention to relevant information (Bloch et al., 1986) and consequently, the higher the likelihood that they consume ethically. On the basis of these observations, it is proposed that knowledge about and involvement in SRC are negatively associated with the propensity to invoke arguments for not behaving ethically.

To test this proposition, the knowledge about and involvement in SRC measures were correlated with the ER, ED and GD dimensions of the CRUB scale. The results are displayed in Table IV. As expected, all correlations were negative and statistically significant.

Consumer perceived effectiveness

A number of studies have shown that SRC behaviour is more probable if individuals think that their behaviour can really make a difference (see e.g. Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Ellen et al., 1991; Kim and Choi, 2005). For instance, people are more likely to engage in socially responsible purchasing or boycotts when they judge that their actions will have a significant impact in the end (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001). It is therefore expected that the tendency to justify one's unethical consumer behaviours on the

TABLE IV
Correlations between knowledge, involvement, perceived effectiveness and the CRUB scale

	Government dependency	Economic rationalisation	Economic development
Knowledge about SRC	-0.33**	-0.31**	-0.26**
Involvement in SRC	-0.38**	-0.37**	-0.36**
Perceived effectiveness	-0.44**	-0.41**	-0.34**

** $p < 0.001$.

basis of ER, ED or GD arguments is negatively correlated with one's perception that his or her socially responsible actions can make a difference. As shown in Table IV, consistent with the theoretical proposition, all correlations between the ER, ED and GD dimensions of the CRUB scale and the perceived effectiveness index were negative and statistically significant. These results offer additional empirical evidence of the CRUB scale's validity.

Discussion

The objective of this research was to develop a measuring instrument that can be used to appraise consumers' justifications for engaging in unethical consumption behaviours. An examination of the consumer social responsibility literature led to the identification of three main arguments used by consumers: economic rationalisation, the reality of economic development and government dependency. A qualitative study conducted in seven countries had offered some empirical support for the relevance of these arguments (Eckhardt et al., 2006). A 28-item three-dimensional scale (the CRUB scale) was developed and tested by means of a survey of 157 Canadian adult consumers. The results showed that the items converged towards their corresponding factors and that the three sub-scales composing the instrument were reliable. In addition, the scale was shown to behave as theoretically expected, bringing some empirical evidence for its construct validity.

This research has some implications for researchers interested in SRC issues and for policy makers. From a research perspective, researchers working in the area of consumer ethics now have a reliable instrument that they can use to measure the degree to which people invoke different justifications for not behaving ethically in the context of their consumption activities. The next step is to use this instrument to study the theoretical variables that drive these justifications. Some correlates which were considered in this research may offer a good starting point. Thus, it would be pertinent to study how the type of arguments used by consumers varies depending on their country of origin and their culture. Eckhardt et al. (2006) proposed that consumers from individualist and capitalist countries

tend to use ER arguments, whereas consumers from socialist countries would rather blame the government. This proposition is based on a limited number of interviews, however, and should be subjected to a more rigorous empirical test with the help of the CRUB scale. Although in this study the mean associated with the ER dimension was significantly greater than the means associated with the government dependency (GD) and economic development (ED) dimensions – a reasonable result in the context of this particular sample – comparative studies would allow a more appropriate test of Eckhardt et al.'s (2006) proposition.

Another valuable direction for research concerns the effect of providing relevant information on the extent to which consumers continue to rely on the ER, ED and GD arguments to justify their unethical behaviours. Many researchers believe that changes in consumer behaviour depend on the concrete actions that are undertaken to inform consumers about social responsibility in general and the consequences of unethical behaviours in particular (see De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007 for a good synthesis of this literature). In this study, consumers' scores on the ER, ED and GD dimensions were negatively correlated with a subjective measure of knowledge about SRC. Although these results are consistent with the general idea that information has an impact, more research is needed in order to establish a causal link between information provision, the use of justifications and behaviour change.

The findings of this study have confirmed the relevance of the consumer-perceived effectiveness concept in the context of SRC research. Thus, consumers who perceive that their individual actions can make a real difference in terms of solving society's ethical problems were less likely to agree with the ER, ED and GD arguments for justifying their unethical behaviours. Based on these preliminary results, it would be interesting to see whether communication strategies aimed at convincing consumers for their individual effectiveness in matters of SRC can modify their use of the arguments and, ultimately, the degree to which they engage in ethical consumption behaviours.

Research is also needed to establish a coherent portrait of consumers who use the ER, ED and GD arguments to justify their unethical consumption behaviours. Several studies indicate that socio-

demographic variables do not have a consistent influence on SRC (Anderson and Cunningham, 1972; Devinney et al., 2006; Schlegelmich et al., 1996). Therefore, there is a need for richer and more complete consumer descriptions in this area. These descriptions should rely on psychological variables such as consumers' self-concept, lifestyles and value orientations.

The results of this research and the proposed CRUB scale can also be useful to policy makers interested in convincing consumers to adopt ethical consumption behaviours. Knowing what type of arguments consumers use to excuse their unethical actions is a first step in developing efficient strategies aimed at changing their behaviour. With the help of the CRUB scale, it is possible to estimate the relative importance of each argument in predicting socially responsible consumer behaviours across various segments and, consequently, to adapt communication strategies in order to make them more persuasive. Descriptive studies using demographic, country-of-origin, value orientation and lifestyle variables and causal studies focussed on identifying the antecedents of the use of justifications for unethical consumption behaviour (e.g. consumer perceived effectiveness, knowledge about SRC) can help policy makers to better understand why consumers behave unethically and to come up with appropriate strategies for behavioural change.

Conclusion

Consumers are powerful actors in the context of the current societal movement promoting socially responsible behaviours. First, they have the power to modify their consumption behaviour to make it more respectful of the environment, of animals and of other inhabitants of the earth. Second, in a business ethics perspective, they have the power to force companies all over the world to embrace the socially responsible paradigm, by voicing their opposition to unethical business practices and preferring products and services that meet society's ethical standards. This is why it is of the utmost importance to identify the obstacles that prevent consumers from developing positive attitudes towards SRC and becoming truly active participants in this societal movement. This research offers a small contribution towards reaching this goal.

As mentioned in the Introduction of this article, this research belongs to the area of descriptive/empirical ethics, with a specific focus on ethical decision making. The CRUB scale developed and tested in this research may help researchers and policy makers to empirically determine the extent to which consumers favour certain types of justifications for not behaving ethically and to identify the variables that may drive these justifications. This is consistent with general ethical decision-making models such as those developed by Hunt and Vitell (1986) and Rest (1986) which propose that ethical decision making proceeds in a series of steps: identifying the moral nature of a situation, making a moral judgement, establishing moral intent and engaging in moral action (O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). The CRUB scale appears to be useful for understanding the process by which consumers develop a moral judgement after interpreting a consumption situation as involving moral issues. This knowledge may in turn be used to construct credible and persuasive arguments to convince consumers to change their behaviours.

The results of this research should be evaluated in light of three significant methodological limitations. First, the CRUB scale was developed and validated with a non-probabilistic and relatively small sample of Canadian adult consumers. Because this study was conducted in a single country, the variance in responses is likely to be lower than what would be expected in the context of a wider sampling domain. Further research is therefore needed to continue validating the scale. In particular, it would be pertinent to translate and adapt the scale so that it can be used with consumers from different countries. Second, as it is the case in general with research dealing with sensitive issues, there exists the possibility that survey participants' answers partly reflected their desire to project a positive image of themselves. The social desirability or self-presentation bias is inherent in all surveys that concern consumers' willingness to adopt SRC behaviours (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Randall and Fernandes, 1991). Chung and Monroe (2003) have shown that the size of the social desirability bias is positively correlated with the ethicality of a given situation. Further research involving the CRUB scale should therefore consider including an independent measure of social desirability, such as that developed by

Crowne and Marlowe (1960). Finally, although the scale validation analyses led to results that are theoretically consistent, these analyses are based on correlations between different scales. Hence, there remains the possibility of a common method problem. Future studies aimed at validating the proposed scale should therefore use information of a more behavioural nature (e.g. actual SRC actions) in order to correlate the scores issued from the CRUB scale with something that is observable.

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