

12th International Marketing Trends Conference
17th-19th January 2013

Isabella Maggioni¹, Francesca Montagnini², Roberta Sebastiani³

¹ Ph.D. Student
isabella.maggioni@unicatt.it
SeGeSTa -Department of Management, Catholic University
Via Necchi 7, 20123 Milan, Italy
Ph. +39 02 72342426

² Post-doc Research Fellow
francesca.montagnini@unicatt.it
SeGeSTa -Department of Management, Catholic University

³ Associate Professor
roberta.sebastiani@unicatt.it
SeGeSTa -Department of Management, Catholic University

Young adults and ethical consumption: an exploratory study in the cosmetics market.

Abstract

Focusing on one of the most powerful market segments in terms of prospective social and economic impact, this study explores the orientation towards sustainable and ethical consumption among young adults. Prior research on ethical consumption has provided little empirical evidence considering this target, despite young adults embody the next generation of consumers and they will potentially support the spread of ethical stances in the future. In order to investigate more in depth the approach to ethical and sustainable consumerism, the study focuses on a particular product category, i.e. natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. Through the analysis of 14 focus group discussions, the study tries to better understand the perceptions about product features, price levels, distribution and communication activities of natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. Two different orientations towards ethical and sustainable cosmetics emerge among young adults, the *Committed* consumers and the *Skeptics*. This investigation on the approach of young adults to natural, organic and ethical cosmetics highlights several implications for the whole product offering and it provides some insights into cutting-edge issues that need to be addressed by theory and practice.

Keywords: ethical consumption, young adult consumers, cosmetics, focus group

1. Introduction

Since the end of the last century, ethical consumption has received growing attention by researchers and practitioners, due to the increasing ethical sensitivity shown by consumers while defining their shopping strategies. The ethical consumer expresses his/her awareness through his/her purchasing behaviour as he/she prioritises ethical concerns when choosing products that take into consideration of environmental harm, labour conditions and animal welfare.

Researchers have specifically addressed the ethical issues related to consumption and reported that consumers sensitivity is sharply increasing in the last decades. However extant literature also shows that consumers' attitudes toward ethical products are not always consistent with their buying behaviours and that the so called attitude-behaviour gap (Belk et al., 2005; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Freestone, McGoldrick, 2008; Carrington et al., 2010) should deserve further research, especially as far as demographic dimensions (age, gender, education and so on) are concerned (Bray, 2011).

In this sense, we argue that there is still a lack of understanding about the key elements that can impede or enhance an effective translation of ethical attitudes into buying behaviour among specific consumer segments. Some scholars pointed out that an "average ethical consumer" does not exist (Auger, 2006; Bucic et al., 2012; Devinney et al. 2010) and called for focused research on market segments with high potential in terms of social and economic impact (Boyd, 2010; Bucic et al. 2012). One of these segments is represented by the young adults (18-26 year old), since they will be the next generation of ethical consumers (Joergens, 2006) and, very likely, they will take their habits into their older age, thus having an impact on the society as a whole. In this regards, they are consumers who could really support the spread of ethical stances in production, distribution and consumption by forcing retailers and manufacturers to develop appropriate strategies in response to their evolving attitudes and behaviours.

The aim of our research is to investigate more in depth the ethical consumption as far as the target of young adult consumers is concerned. In particular, we would like to explore which are their specificities while approaching ethical consumption.

Moreover, we are interested in better understanding which are the dimensions related to the product features, price levels, distribution alternatives and communication activities, to which they seem to be more sensitive when addressing ethical issues in purchasing.

In order to answer our research questions, we decided to focus on a specific category of products: ethical cosmetics. According to Organic Monitor and Kline Group, two leading companies periodically performing surveys in this field, ethical cosmetics can be defined as environmentally friendly products, respectful of animals and labour conditions; in addition, they embrace also natural and organic features.

The encouraging results of the ethical cosmetics industry in the last years make this setting of analysis particularly noteworthy. As a matter of fact, although not immune to the downturn in the global economy, the natural personal care market seems to have recovered more quickly than any other segments, outpacing overall industry growth in all four major market regions. Clear evidence of the potential related to this segment relies on the fact that many large international cosmetic companies are entering the market with their own ethical cosmetic labels and dynamic start-up companies provide an additional stimulus. The European market is particularly interesting both in terms of market share of natural and organic cosmetics, and in terms of consumer knowledge regarding these product categories. In particular, the Italian market is showing a very positive trend in sales through its retail trade system – including pharmacies, “Erboristerias” and organic food shops – and represents an interesting context in which exploring the consumption of ethical cosmetics.

Due to the exploratory nature of our study, we decided to adopt a qualitative approach based on the focus group methodology, that allowed us to gather rich descriptive information about the young consumers’ opinions, beliefs and attitudes about ethical cosmetics.

The paper is structured as follows. We start by considering previous conceptualizations of ethical consumption and the main implications related to the so called “attitude-behaviour gap”. We then review previous literature referred to young adult consumers and their consumption processes. After describing the methodology adopted, we report the main findings emerging from the exploratory analysis conducted on young adult consumers and their attitudes towards ethical cosmetics. Finally, results are discussed along with managerial implications and suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumption and ethical products

Researchers have specifically addressed the ethical issues related to consumption in order to identify alternative modes through which ethically minded consumers expressed their concerns and perform their purchases. Some of them, such as voluntary simplicity (Ballantine and Creery, 2010; Cherrier, 2009) and slow living (Parkins and Craig, 2006), consider that, as

responsible consumers, people should consume less in order to reduce the waste of resources as well as to foster sustainable development. Others, such as consumer resistance (Kozinets and Handelman, 2004), anti-consumption (Kozinets et al., 2010) and boycott or buycott behaviours (Hye-Jin and Nelson, 2009; Neilson, 2010), represent forms of radical criticism to mainstream consumption and foster a progressive detachment that alienates consumers from markets. In several cases, these consumption expressions exceed the individual consumption to pursue a 'renewed cooperative engagement' (Moraes et al., 2010) and forms of collective action (Harrison et al., 2005), such as community-supported agriculture and ethical banking. Beyond this more radical forms, previous literature has pointed out how also the mainstream market is becoming more and more aware and sensitive to ethical and sustainable practices. Consumers progressively seem to be more attracted by companies and offering systems that appear compatible with the consumer 'ethical strategy'.

However, in most affluent countries, ethical products still represent small market niches, as in the case of Fair Trade products (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Kim et al., 2010; Nicholls, 2010). A considerable body of researches has so far produced conflicting findings (Cherrier, 2005) about the reasons behind the so called attitude-behaviour gap (Belk et al., 2005; Nicholls and Lee, 2006; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005; Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008); the gap is related to the discrepancy between the increasing positive attitude of a large portion of the population toward ethical products and the relatively small market share that these kind of products has gained so far.

Besides consumers' personal values and experiences, and biases due to social desirability (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Bray et al., 2011), scholars pointed out some other factors to which consumers seem to be more sensitive while addressing ethical issues in purchasing.

Firstly, the ethical orientation appears to be affected by primary concerns about the core aspects of the ethical products, such as quality and effectiveness, higher average prices, packaging, and adequate product range and availability (Bray et al., 2011; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

A relevant key factor is represented by the need for wider and deeper information about the ethical features (related to the production processes, the animal testing, the respect of the environment and of the labour conditions) that support the purchasing decision towards ethical products instead of conventional ones (Bray et al., 2011; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). In this sense a critical role is exerted by communication activities and information exchange between manufacturers/retailers and consumers.

Finally, recent contributions have also underlined the importance of the context, the outlets and the physical surrounding (Carrington et al., 2010; Sebastiani et al., 2012) in which the ethical products purchasing takes place.

These are all elements that we will specifically address in the empirical study here presented.

2.2 Young adult consumers

Literature on young consumers has explored several issues related to different product categories (Anderson and Sharp, 2010), such as fashion and clothing (Drake-Bridges and Burgess, 2010; Gam, 2011; Joergens, 2006; Jegethesan et al., 2012;), internet and mobile phone services (Thorbjørnsen et al., 2007, Ling and Yttri, 2002; Kwon and Chidambaram, 2000; Atilgan-Inan, and Karaca, 2011; Engel et al., 2011; Goi, and Ng, 2011), alcohol consumption and drinking habits (Fry, 2010; Seaman and Ikegwuonu, 2011; Taylor and Barber, 2012). Just a few recent empirical studies investigate the topic of ethical and sustainable consumption among young people, analyzing green purchasing behaviour (Lee, 2008, 2009), ethical purchasing motivation (Bucic et al., 2012;) and focusing on specific product categories or habits (Ma et al., 2012; Gam, 2011; Joergens, 2006; Jegethesan et al., 2012;).

In Bucic et al. (2012)'s study on motivation in ethical purchasing, young consumers approach ethical consumption according to three different patterns (*Reserved social conscience*, *Indifferents*, and *Committed*). This outcome confirms the fact that the "average ethical consumer" does not exist (Auger, 2006; Devinney et al., 2010), neither when analyzing young consumers (Bucic et al., 2012). When young consumers purchase products, ethical motivation seems not to represent the first "tier" of consideration (Bucic et al., 2012). Moreover, the impact of ethical issues on youth purchasing behaviour results to be relatively low, particularly concerning the studies on fashion and clothing (Joergsen, 2006; Jegethesan et al., 2012).

In the present paper young adult consumers are identified as people aged 18-26, labelled by some authors as the *Generation Me* or the *IGen* (Twenge, 2006; Schmeltz, 2012). They also represent the final tail of the *Millenians'* cohort (Bucic et al., 2012; Pendergast, 2007). *IGen* members grow up in a networked world (Howe and Strauss, 2000), characterized by an enormous number of choices and opportunities. In general, they are extremely individualist and tend to consider their needs before thinking of those of the others (Schmeltz, 2012), but at the same time they are inclined to be responsive to ethical and sustainable issues (Bucic et al., 2012; Smith, 2011). It is interesting to pay particular attention to this segment due to the fact

that it comprises the consumers of the future, whose habits and values will drive production and distribution markets during the next years. Young adult consumers are neither adolescents nor adults, but rather they can be defined as *emerging adults* (Arnett, 2000). They live a particular exploration period of their life (Benson and Fussenberg, 2007), in which they could test and experience a “*variety of possible life directions in love, work and worldviews*” (Arnett, 2000, p. 470). They still present some characteristics of the adolescence, but feel themselves to be already projected into the adult world. In particular, they are considered as the most consumption oriented of all generations (Sullivan and Heitmeyer, 2008). Due to materialism, they bring meaning to life, pursue happiness and define their success through the products they own. They try to fulfil their residual sense of inadequacy through a process of “symbolic self-completion” (Wicklund and Gollwitzer, 1982; Isaksen and Roper, 2012) and use products to fight against negative moods.

Young adults have a greater “public” life than many others in the society and thus the judgment of their peers represents an important factor for one’s social acceptance (DeLVecchio, 2002). Their need for compliance is therefore enhanced (Isaksen and Roper, 2012) and possessions are used to seek social inclusion and to connect to other people (Ji, 2002).

3. Methodology and research setting

In order to answer our research questions we decided to adopt the focus group methodology since it represents the most appropriate technique when the goals of the research are general, there is minimal prior knowledge about a particular problem and the range of responses that are likely to emerge (Zeller, 1993).

This approach has been thus considered particularly useful when studying ethical consumption in specific settings (Clavin and Lewis, 2005; Bray et al., 2011). As a matter of fact, it provides researchers an excellent and a time-efficient way to investigate the underlying logic used and the type of evidence brought to bear by participants on a given situation or product (Lindlof, 1995). Focus group methodology is suited to create an environment in which participants have the opportunity to share their thoughts, beliefs and opinions, rather than selecting an option from a priori restricted list (Greenbaum, 2000). Moreover, the dynamic interplay generated among group members may offer rich and descriptive information on the topic investigated from the respondents’ viewpoints.

The research was conducted through 14 focus groups according to the recommendation of Krueger and Casey (2009), each containing from 7 to 9 members (108 participants in total), considered the optimal size for group discussions (Greenbaum, 2000).

Through a purposive sampling approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), young consumers aged between 18 and 26 years were recruited, ensuring that participants present differences in income, educational backgrounds and live in big cities as well as in small towns, especially in Northern Italy. Furthermore, participants were selected regardless of their declared commitment to ethical issues and of their previous experience as ethical cosmetics customers.

In order to ensure that that key issues were discussed and to guarantee consistency between the groups, we developed a structured discussion guide with extensive, open-ended questions as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2009). It consisted of three main parts: in the first, we asked participant to talk about ethical products in general (without considering any specific category), describing their opinions about the features that such a category of products have and should have; then we asked to discuss specifically about the current and desired features of ethical cosmetics; we asked to describe and discuss their experience as ethical cosmetics customers, from the information seeking phase to post-purchase evaluations. Each focus group has been conducted by two members of the research team. They did not strictly follow the structured guide but allow the discussion among the participants to develop freely according to the established guidelines in order to minimize the ‘social desirability bias’ (Clavin and Lewis, 2005). They decided to adopt a deliberately informal and conversational moderation style to facilitate a free flowing discussion. Moreover, they restrained their interjections at a minimum level and introduced probing questions only when participants’ assertions were ambiguous or to encourage further clarification.

In order to enhance the effectiveness of the focus group, participants were left free to reconsider their comments and to re-evaluate their experiences as a consequence of the interaction with other participants (Schindler 1992).

Each focus group lasted about two hours, and all focus group discussions were recorded and verbatim transcribed. The content of the transcriptions and of the written notes outlining significant points and impressions prepared after the discussions were analyzed to identify key issues emerging from the group discussions.

3.1 The data setting: the ethical cosmetics

The definition of ethical personal care products varies widely across different countries, depending on whether and to what extent this type of products are included in national statistics.

While considering statistics and previous researches about cosmetics, it is fundamental to keep in mind that ethical features are often mixed up with natural and organic characteristics; in the present paper we will henceforth refer to this product category as “natural, organic and ethical cosmetics”. More in general what emerges is that in the cosmetics market, natural and ethical concerns have grown in parallel to sustainable development concerns, and eventually mixed to become a real lifestyle. The sector is increasingly backing sustainability, stands out for naturalness, climate and resource protection, and supports social and fair projects. In 2012 seven cosmetics firms were on the US Ethisphere Institute’s list of 100 firms rated as the “World’s Most Ethical Companies”.

The ever-increasing consumers interest and adoption of natural, organic and ethical cosmetics around the globe has driven an outstanding expansion of this segment in the market. According to Kline Group, this segment is growing at twice the rate of classic cosmetics (+10% per annum vs +4% total H&B) in the US and Europe, and at an even faster pace in Asia. Euromonitor forecasts that the worldwide market for organic, natural and ethical cosmetics will grow by an average of 5% per year until 2016. According to Organic Monitor, a British company specialized market research on organic industry and sustainability, the worldwide market of natural beauty care is worth some 9 billion US dollars. Positive trends of development, both in terms of market share and of consumer knowledge, have been registered in the last years in the European market, and specifically in the Italian market.

In Kline Group report on the global natural care market ten levels of “naturalness” of a product are highlighted: from level one products, containing predominantly synthetic ingredients with only tiny amounts of plant material, to level 10 products, containing only organic and natural ingredients. Level 1-4 products are called as being “natural-inspired” and level 5-10 products as being “truly natural”. Surveys by the Kline Group show that the market volume of the global natural, organic and ethical care market is as much as 25 billion US dollars. Moreover, according to Organic Monitor, the current market share of natural cosmetics is already approaching 10% in countries such as the USA, Brazil, Germany and Italy.

In developed markets, natural, organic and ethical cosmetics are traditionally sold through market channels dedicated to organic products (organic specialized shops and health food

stores) plus drugstores and pharmacies, and increasingly in conventional cosmetics stores (perfumeries, spas, conventional retail), reaching out to a growing number of consumers. Therefore, at this stage companies operating in this market still need to focus on relevant target groups as well as to develop appropriate offering systems and distribution channels.

4. Findings and discussion

Young adult consumers prove to be sensitive to sustainability issues, especially to environmental protection and animal welfare. However they express a blurred perception when considering natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. In particular, they complain with the difficulties encountered in distinguishing truly natural cosmetics from the fake ones. According to our findings, they do not have a clear definition on their own minds about what a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic is.

“When we consider food, the difference is obvious and it is in the taste. Organic fruit has a different taste compared to the one grown with chemical additives. But when we think about cosmetics, knowing if the product is truly sustainable becomes harder.” (Chiara, 22)

Despite this underlying attitude, young adults express a radical approach to sustainability issues in cosmetics. This study identifies two different orientations towards natural, organic and ethical cosmetics, stemming from the analysis of the focus groups: the *Committed* consumer and the *Skeptics*. This outcome is consistent with previous studies in the field of sustainable consumption behaviour (Bucic et al., 2012). The *Committed* young consumer buys natural, organic and ethical cosmetics for two main reasons. The first one is related to his/her own intimate beliefs and it also reflects a personal choice. The second reason relies on young consumer's family heritage and on the consumption habits of his/her family members, particularly of mothers. On the other hand, the *Skeptics* segment includes young adults who are critical and suspicious about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics, despite at the same time they show interest in the topic and they seem to be sensitive to sustainability issues. Consumption of natural, organic, and ethical cosmetics seems also to be a way to interact with and to introduce young people's self to the society. In the following sub-sections the study will investigate more in depth which are the young adult consumers' perceptions related to each of the 4Ps of the marketing mix for natural, organic and ethical cosmetics.

4.1. Beyond the effectiveness

Analyzing the *Product* dimension, young adults argue that the most important feature of a cosmetic product is related to its effectiveness. Moreover, effectiveness represents a critical aspect when evaluating the quality of a cosmetic. In particular, the *Skeptics* consider effectiveness one of the most important features of a cosmetic product. However, they tend to be dubious in assessing the quality and the effectiveness of natural, organic and ethical cosmetics.

“I do not trust their ingredients. I think that conventional products are more strictly controlled. However, they (natural products) are surely less harmful to the environment and I am certain that their production has been designed respectfully of the environment and of people that work in their production. They comply with animal welfare and they also represent a way to help the poorest countries in the world.” (Giacomo,20)

Moreover, they highlight the lack of controls and the subsequent lower quality of a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic compared to the one of a traditional cosmetic.

“In my opinion they do not work. A traditional product is more effective and controlled. Thinking about a cosmetic, it should be a strongly linked to chemistry and it must be tested to be effective. It cannot be a wholly natural product...I mean, if it is completely natural, it is as effective as water!” (Giulio, 24)

Another issue that has emerged is related to the difficulty, or even the impossibility, to verify the effectiveness and therefore the quality of a natural, organic and ethical product. Natural, organic and ethical cosmetic are perceived as less effective on-the-spot.

“When I think about a natural cosmetic, I’m not always sure that it is better in quality. Sometimes it seems that people spend more money to protect the environment, getting worse results. The effectiveness of some natural products could be tested only over the time.” (Elena 19)

Considering the *Committed*, cosmetic effectiveness plays a key role during the decision-making process, but additional aspects of the products are taken into account when evaluating the quality of natural, organic and ethical cosmetic. These features are mainly related to the emotional side of cosmetics consumption.

In particular, natural, organic and ethical cosmetics are able to satisfy in a better way the need for safety expressed by the *Committed* consumers.

“They are comforting products, especially for women, who often prefer natural products than the chemical ones, which could be harmful to health. Moreover, buying these products gives an impression of doing something important for the environment. The main difference is that natural products do not hurt your health and they do not leave any side effects. I trust more in them.” (Valentina, 20)

As far as the emotional side of natural, organic and ethical cosmetics, perfume represents one of the must-have features for this kind of products.

“There are some fragrance-free skin care creams because perfume is chemical and could be harmful for health. However, I would not buy a fragrance-free hand cream. I perceive the absence of perfume as something missing. It could be the best cream ever, but it is the smell that attracts me.” (Rossella, 23)

Another important element in assessing the preference towards a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic is associated to the product appearance. Young adult consumers argue that the look of natural, organic and ethical cosmetics is often less impressive and, in some ways, less appealing than the one of conventional cosmetics. This is one of the main reasons why packaging should play a prominent role in product conceiving and designing.

“Packaging is important because it could let me better understand which is the difference between natural products and chemical ones and lead me to buy them.” (Marta, 18)

Furthermore, packaging is considered by young consumers as a way to assess the product features, since it directly reflects the quality of a cosmetic.

“Packaging must attract customers’ eyes. If the package is good-looking outside, it makes the consumer believe that the product inside is good as well.” (Francesca, 19)

As well as serving an informative function, packaging must be also in line with the product’s promise and vocation.

“Natural products must be sustainable starting from the packaging. These products must be packed as little as possible, using recycled materials. A sober packaging in shapes, colors and product quantity sends a clear message about sustainability.” (Mirella, 21)

4.2 Value for money

The *Price* dimension represent another critical point for young adult consumers. Natural, organic and ethical cosmetics' price plays a key role during the decision-making process of the buyer, especially if this type of products is bought regularly.

“Price is determinant for my purchasing choices. Especially for habitual buying, price has a strong impact. The sustainable and ethical lifestyle is difficult to sustain.” (Pietro, 22)

Young adults perceive natural, organic and ethical cosmetics too much expensive to be considered for all of their cosmetic needs.

“Because of the price, I chose to not use natural products for all of my cosmetic needs. They are too expensive, so for instance I use a natural face cream, but to moisturize the rest of my body I use a conventional cream, without any ethical or sustainable promise” (Martina, 24)

Another point deals with the value for money of a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic and with the difficulties encountered in assessing the quality of the product. This is particularly true when considering the *Skeptics'* buying habits.

“You pay more for something that you are not sure about. If it is effective, it is better since it does not contain any chemical ingredients. However if it has no effect or, even worse, negative effects due to a lack of controls and tests or it does not provide sufficient safeguards, I am not willing to pay more for such a kind of product.” (Laura, 21)

Higher prices together with uncertainty in quality leads to a braking effect for the first purchase. Nevertheless, after appreciating the properties of a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic, young adults become willing to pay more for it.

“The weakness of these products lies in their price that is quite higher than the one of traditional products. After appreciating the effectiveness of a natural product, I become willing to pay more and to always buy this category because it satisfies my needs. However, when I find myself to buy sight unseen, I choose traditional products.” (Giuliana, 19)

The *Committed* youth agrees with the issue related to higher prices, but thinks also that the price is so high because it includes a surplus that expresses a positive outcome in sustainability.

“The differences in price is rewarded with quality, because there is much care of the product. And this increases my confidence in the brand. These products cost more, but in that way you support workers in disadvantaged countries and the company is worried about the environment. I prefer to pay more for a product that respects topics that matter to me.” (Valentina, 20)

4.3 The need for information

The availability of information about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics represents a determinant condition in considering the purchase of this type of products. Young adult consumers complain with a scarcity of information about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. Therefore, before purchasing, young consumers find themselves to think carefully about the real sustainability of a product. The lack of information makes also difficult to distinguish between conventional and natural, organic and ethical cosmetics, besides making harder to find out the available alternatives.

“There is not enough information. If I were informed about children labour exploitation by a company, I would not buy its products. But I do not know, so I ignore the issue.” (Lorenzo,24)

The *Skeptics* are also questioning about the truthfulness and the authenticity of the information delivered by companies involved in natural, organic and ethical cosmetics.

“It is always difficult to verify all natural products features. Moreover, who can tell us that what is written on packages or labels about production methods is really the truth?” (Elena, 19)

Consequently, the approach to information of young consumers is different from the conventional one. The youth assumes a pro-active role in seeking and in evaluating information about this product category.

“In my opinion, it is people that look for a natural product, it is not the natural product that looks for you! If you are interested in buying an unusual product, you engage in getting information about it.” (Alessandro, 22)

The pro-active behaviour in information searching is typical of the *Committed* consumers. On the other hand, the *Skeptics* do not feel ready to act in this way, despite they still complain about the lack of information. The pro-active consumer's role in information seeking results in an emerging reliance on new media in order to get information about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. Social media, blogs, and in general the Net represent the most common source of information for sustainability issues and sustainable products.

"I discovered these products while watching make-up tutorials on Youtube. All I know about natural cosmetics is thanks to these girls that put their videos on the Web. No ads by companies, simply people talk about the benefits of these products." (Lucia, 19)

New media and *word-of-mouth* are the most effective and widely exploited sources of information by young adult consumers to gather knowledge on natural, organic and ethical cosmetics.

4.4 The personal side of the point of sales

The need for information about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics has some marked implications on in-store services and on the store environment as a whole. When purchasing this type of cosmetics, young adult consumers refer both to specialized and to conventional stores. Nevertheless, specialized stores represent the favourite place where buying natural, organic and ethical cosmetics.

"I used to go to specialized stores where there are sales assistants that recommend products. You explain your needs, your problems and what you are looking for in a product and they can advise you the best solution. I need a trained sales staff that should be also friendly and always have the right suggestion for me." (Elisa, 21).

One of the features that brings young adults to mainly consider specialized stores for their purchases is the presence of well-trained sales assistants. According to what has emerged while analyzing the *Product* and the *Communication* dimensions, the youth seeks to fill the information gap about natural, organic and ethical cosmetics relying on different sources of knowledge. One among them, and perhaps the most effective one, is headed by the sales assistant. The role of sales assistants is fundamental in comforting consumers, getting them informed about products' ingredients, properties, and sustainability features. Considering the observed high level of confusion about this category of products, sales assistants must be able

to explain and to clarify any doubt that could assail the customer while buying natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. A young adult consumer perceives more favourably such a sales assistant that proves to be highly involved in sustainability issues and therefore seems to definitely believe in what she/he is selling.

“The best shops are the ones in which sales assistants are well-trained and, above all, firmly convinced of the product’s effectiveness. It is fundamental that the staff has previously tried these products.” (Erika, 23)

The need for information has also several implications for conventional stores. When no dedicated staff is arranged, the layout of the corner should accomplish the goal of supplying information. Displays and the whole layout design of the corner act as a guide for the customer’s shopping expedition.

“When I step into a store, I have not enough information. So, I need to be guided to buy in the best way. Everything must be very clear and simple. If the store has a refined environment and a tidy layout, but is not able to explain me something about the products’ features, I will not buy for sure. Each shelf should provide information through displays, illustrating the origin of the product, the way in which is produced and which are its features.” (Riccardo, 21)

Considering the shopping experience, young adults prefer getting closer to the product by trying it. The scarcity of information represents a critical issue for natural, organic and ethical cosmetics and this leads the consumer to prefer testing the product before buying it. To overcome this issue, the design of special areas dedicated to product-testing seems to be an appreciated solution by young adult consumers. Moreover, free-samples represent a powerful tool for the product to get in touch with the consumer.

“I really appreciate stores with areas in which you can try products for free and getting free-samples. They are very useful because they help me to know something more about the brand and which are the available alternatives on the market” (Carlotta, 19)

Concerning with the need for reassurance, it has been observed that young adults prefer to try this kind of products first, in order to get confident with them. Only after testing the product effectiveness, they become willing to buy a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic.

5. Conclusions, managerial implications and further research

As far as our research is concerned, young adult consumers seem to be sensitive to sustainability issues even if they do not have a shared definition of what a sustainable cosmetic product is, often merging up natural, organic and ethical features. On the one hand, this fact appears consistent with the general definition of ethical products, provided by previous researches and with the interpretation offered by companies operating in this industry, always considering ethical, natural and organic characteristics as a whole bundle. On the other hand, it reflects also an overall disorientation of young adults about the incremental benefits that they should expect to achieve by purchasing this kind of products (tangible or merely intangible value added? related to product naturalness and/or to environment and resources protection? based on social and fair projects or not?).

Two main orientations emerge from our analysis. The *Skeptic* young consumers remain particularly doubtful about the ethical product features and do not perceive the opportunity to replace any conventional products they are used to buy. This skepticism seems to be also determined by a lower level of involvement in sustainability issues. The *Committed* young consumers seem to be more engaged by the values underlying the natural, organic and ethical cosmetic and perceive them worth of consideration for purchasing. This outcome is consistent with previous empirical evidence on the topic (Bucic et al., 2012; Lee 2008,2009) and witnesses the nonexistence of the so called “average ethical consumer” (Auger, 2006; Devinney et al., 2010) also for the young adult target.

According to previous literature, further research is needed in order to better understand the “attitude-behaviour gap” and the reasons why positive attitudes towards ethical products do not often result into concrete ethical purchasing behaviour. Scholars pointed out that elements such as quality, price, communication and outlets (Bray et al. 2011; Carrington et al., 2010; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005) heavily affect the effective translation of ethical attitudes into buying behaviour. In this sense, our work wants to contribute to the debate by going more in depth in the analysis of such dimensions that can impede or enhance the purchase of ethical products, in particular natural, organic and ethical cosmetics. Our research questions and the subsequent findings address fundamental topics connected to the development of marketing strategies that companies managing ethical products face in everyday activities. More specifically, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of the main issues related to the deployment of an effective strategy while approaching the young adults market in the context of ethical products.

Our analysis points out four main focal issues related to the young adult consumer orientation towards natural, organic and ethical cosmetics and the way in which they perceive the extant offering systems: the product effectiveness and the concerns beyond it; the consistency between value and actual price; the quest for specific information and communication about ethical cosmetic features; the relevance of the point of sale as a platform for deepening knowledge and improving the customer experience.

About the first issue, related to the product evaluation, an overall quest for reassurance of product features and quality levels emerges among young adult consumers: the quality perception is one of the main relevant aspects influencing the decision making process in ethical cosmetics. Some differences occur between the two main young consumer orientations. On the one hand, the *Skeptics* are mainly interested in product effectiveness and they seem not to perceive higher levels of quality in ethical cosmetics compared to conventional cosmetics; on the contrary, sometimes they even suspect that organic, natural and ethical features could spoil the product effectiveness, which is their first target. Paradoxically, their trust in the levels of control on ingredients appears to be lower than the one accorded to conventional products. Difficulties to verify the actual superior level of quality emerge as a critical aspect to be addressed by the companies. On the other hand, the *Committed* consumers often use the natural, organic and ethical labels as a proxy of quality and superior control on the product composition. Moreover, they seem to be more affected by intangible values related to the ethical cosmetic, while approaching their purchases: our analysis highlights how much they particularly look for, and appreciate, the bundle of benefits surrounding the core features of the ethical products, such as the attractiveness of the packaging, the perfume and other emotional aspects.

Thus, this research could provide some useful insights for cosmetics companies who wish to address young adult consumers: while facing the general disorientation perceived by this target, they should work on strategies and actions aimed at reinforcing the perception of quality of ethical products. In this sense, companies should pay more attention not only to the product organoleptic features, but also to the packaging and to its role as an information means, to the overall product attractiveness, i.e. reconsidering the perfume and the texture used.

As far as the second focal point of our analysis - value and price- is concerned, our research points out a general perception of high prices which often discourage the young adult consumers from the final decision to buy a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic. The impossibility to verify the quality of a natural, organic and ethical cosmetic appears as one of

the main causes of complains about a higher price level than the one of conventional cosmetics. However, the *Skeptics* and the *Committed* differ in the evaluation of the price/quality ratio: while the formers consider it too high to switch to ethical products, the latter perceive it as high but adequate to the superior quality guarantee provided.

Information and communication, the third issue of our research, represent a critical aspect in the young consumer-ethical cosmetic relationship. The focus groups pointed out a lack of clear information available on the market about the characteristics and specificities of ethical products and of ethical cosmetics in particular. Moreover, young adults are more used to gather information through alternative communication channels and new media that, according to their perceptions, are still rarely used by ethical cosmetics providers; also the way in which young adult consumers approach communication with people and companies is more proactive and characterized by high levels of involvement. According to the narratives gathered, conventional communication and related channels are less effective to reach this target, that ask for more interactive means of engagement.

In this sense, ethical cosmetics companies should rethink their way to attract and interact with this young target, adopting new and unconventional communication strategies that can enhance the young adults perception of involvement with the ethical product.

The fourth focal issue of our research relates to the point of sales. As far as ethical, natural and organic cosmetics are concerned, specialised stores appear as the most effective in order to provide the needed levels of information and support to finalise the purchase. In particular, for this kind of products, the role of sales assistants recovers the centrality lost in self-service retail format, which is the most widespread format adopted by companies targeting young adult consumers.

According to the perceptions gathered in our focus groups, managers should reconsider stores characteristics and layout, stressing the informational aspects in order to reassure young adults of the superior quality of ethical products (also through sales assistants) and, at the same time, implementing the experiential and emotional features to which young adults appear to be quite sensitive.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, findings are limited to a specific kind of ethical products and to a geographical context. Further research could explore the same issues with regard to other ethical products/services and verify through a quantitative approach the extent to which our findings could be generalized to other settings.

Finally, another relevant aspect emerges from our research: ethical behaviour represents a part of the consumers' identity and moral realisation (Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Cherrier, 2009).

Literature on a specific kind of ethical products, Fair Trade products, have pointed out how the ethical purchasing is animated mainly by social motivations (rather than personal) (Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008) and that ethical behaviour is also a matter of manifesting the moral side of the person to the collectivity (Varul, 2009; Andorfer and Liebe, 2012), by distinguishing from mainstream consumers. In particular, young adults are in the end stage of forming their personal identity and developing a personal system of beliefs and values (Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008). Consumption of natural, organic, and ethical cosmetics seems also to represent for them a way to interact with and to introduce young people's self to the society. In this regard, we argue that the relationship between ethical consumption and the identity construction process should deserve more attention in further research.

References

- Anderson, K., Sharp, B. (2010). Do growing brands win younger consumers?. *International Journal of Market Research*, 52 (4), 433-441.
- Andorfer, V.A., Liebe, U. (2012). Research on Fair Trade Consumption – a Review. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 106, 415-435.
- Arnett, J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469–480.
- Atilgan-Inan, E., Karaca, B. (2011). Planned behaviour of young consumers shopping on the internet. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 19(4), 528-537.
- Auger, P. (2006). Ethical consumerism: Reality or myth?. *The Melbourne Review*, 2(1), 78–83.
- Auger, P., Devinney T. (2007). Do what consumers say matter? the misalignment of preferences with unconstrained ethical intentions. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 76(4), 361-383
- Ballantine, P.W., Creery, S. (2010). The consumption and disposition behaviour of voluntary simplifiers. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(1), 45-56
- Belk, R.W., Devinney, T., Eckhardt, G. (2005). Consumer ethics across cultures. *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 8(3), 275-289.
- Benson, J. E., Fussenberg, F.F. (2007). Entry into adulthood: are adult role transitions meaningful markers of adult identity? *Advances in Life Course research*, 11, 199-224.
- Boyd, D. (2010). Ethical determinants for generations X and Y. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 93, 465-469.
- Bray, J., Johns, N., Kilburn, D. (2011). An exploratory study into the factors impeding ethical consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 98(4), 597–608.
- Bucic, T., Harris, J., Arli, D. (2012). Ethical consumers among the Millennials: a cross-national study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 110(1), 113-131.
- Carrigan, M., Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer - do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 560-577.

- Carrington, M., Neville, B., Whitwell, G. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between the ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour of ethically minded consumers. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 97(1), 139-158.
- Cherrier, H. (2005), Modelling consumer decision making in fair trade, in R. Harrison, T. Newholm, D. Shaw (Eds.), *The ethical consumer* (pp. 137-154). London: Sage.
- Cherrier, H. (2009). Disposal and simple living: Exploring the circulation of goods and the development of sacred consumption. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 8(6), 327-339.
- Clavin, B., Lewis, A. (2005). Focus Groups on Consumers' Ethical Beliefs. in R. Harrison, T. Newholm, D. Shaw (Eds.), *The ethical consumer* (pp. 173-187). London: Sage.
- De Pelsmacker, P., Driesen, L., Rayp, G. (2005). Do consumers care about ethics? willingness to pay for fair-trade coffee. *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 39(2), 363-385.
- DelVecchio, G. (2002). *Creating ever-cool: A marketer's guide to a kid's heart*. New Orleans, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, Inc.
- Devinney, T., Auger, P., Eckhardt, G. M. (2010). *The myth of the ethical consumer*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Drake-Bridges, E., Burgess, B. (2010). Personal preferences of tween shoppers. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 14(4), 624-633.
- Engel, C. J., Bell, R. L., Meier, R. J., Martin, M. J., Rumpel, J. H. (2011). Young consumers in the new marketing ecosystem: An analysis of their usage of interactive technologies. *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, 15(2), 23-44.
- Freestone, O., McGoldrick, P. (2008). Motivations of the ethical consumer. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 79(4), 445-467.
- Fry, M.-L. (2010). Countering consumption in a culture of intoxication. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 26(13-14), 1279-1294.
- Gam, H. J. (2011). Are fashion-conscious consumers more likely to adopt eco-friendly clothing?. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 15(2), 178-193.
- Glaser, B.G., Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Goi, C., Ng, P. (2011). Perception of young consumers on mobile phone applications in Malaysia. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 15(1), 47-55.
- Greenbaum, T.L. (2000). *Moderating Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Facilitation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Harrison, R., Newholm, T., Shaw, D. (Eds.) (2005). *The ethical consumer*. London: Sage.
- Hye-Jin, P., Nelson, M.R. (2009). To buy or not to buy: Determinants of socially responsible consumer behavior and consumer reactions to cause-related and boycotting ads. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 31(2), 75-90.
- Howe, N., Strauss, W. (2000). *Millennials rising: the next great generation*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Isaksen, K. J., Roper, S. (2012). The commodification of self-esteem: branding and British teenagers. *Psychology and Marketing*, 29(3): 117-135.
- Jegethesan, K., Sneddon, J. N., Soutar, G. N. (2012). Young Australian consumers' preferences for fashion apparel attributes. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 16(3), 275-289.

- Ji, M. F. (2002). Children's relationships with brands: 'True love' or 'one night' stand? *Psychology & Marketing*, 19, 369-387.
- Joergens, C. (2006). Ethical fashion: myth or future trend?. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, 10(3), 360-371.
- Kim, G., Lee, G., Park, K. (2010). A cross-national investigation on how ethical consumers build loyalty toward fair trade brands. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 96(4), 589-611
- Kozinets, R.V., Handelman, J. M. (2004). Adversaries of consumption: Consumer movements, activism, and ideology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 691-704.
- Kozinets, R.V., Handelman, J. M., Lee, M. S. W. (2010). Don't read this; or, who cares what the hell anti-consumption is, anyways?. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 13(3), 225-233.
- Krueger, R. A., Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*. London: Sage.
- Kwon, H. S., Chidambaram, L. (2000). A test of the technology adoption model: the case of cellular telephone adoption. Proceedings of the HICSS-34, Hawaii, January 3-6.
- Lee, K. (2008). Opportunities for green marketing: young consumers. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 26(6), 573-586.
- Lee, K. (2009). Gender differences in Hong Kong adolescent consumers' green purchasing behavior. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 26(2), 87-96.
- Lindlof, T. R. (1995). *Qualitative communication research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ling, R., Yttri, B. (2002). Hyper-coordination via mobile phone in Norway. In Katz, J.E., Aakhus, M. (eds.), *Perpetual contact*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ma, Y. J., Littrel, M. A., Niehm, L. (2012). Young female consumers' intentions toward fair trade consumption. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 40(1), 41-63.
- Moraes, C., Szmigin, I., Carrigan, M. (2010). Living production-engaged alternatives: An examination of new consumption communities. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 13(3), 273-298.
- Neilson, L.A. (2010). Boycott or buycott? understanding political consumerism. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(3), 214-227.
- Nicholls, A. (2010). Fair trade: Towards an economics of virtue. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 92, 241-255.
- Nicholls, A., Lee, N. (2006). Purchase decision-making in fair trade and the ethical purchase 'gap': 'is there a fair trade twix?'. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 14(4), 369-386.
- Parkins, W., Craig, G. (2006). *Slow living*. Oxford, New York: Berg.
- Pendergast, D. (2007). The MilGen and society. In Bahr, N., Pendergast, D. (Eds.), *Being a Millennial adolescent: what do teachers need to know?* (pp. 23-40). Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Schindler, R.M. (1992). The Real Lesson of New Coke: The Value of Focus Groups for Predicting the Effects of Social Influence. *Marketing Research*, 4 (December), 22-27.
- Schmeltz, L. (2012). Consumer-oriented CSR communication: focusing on ability or morality? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 17(1), 29-49.
- Seaman, P., Ikegwuonu, T. (2011). 'I don't think old people should go to clubs': how universal is the alcohol transition amongst young adults in the united kingdom?. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 14(7), 745-759.

- Sebastiani, R., Montagnini, F., Dalli, D. (2012). Ethical consumption and new business models in the food industry. Evidence from the Eataly case. *Journal of Business Ethics*, forthcoming. Doi: 10.1007/s10551-012-1343-1
- Smith, B. (2011). Who shall lead us? How cultural values and ethical ideologies guide young marketers' evaluations of the transformational manager–leader. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 100(4), 633-645.
- Sullivan, P., Heitmeyer, J. (2008). Looking at Gen Y shopping preferences and intentions: Exploring the role of experience and apparel involvement. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 32, 285–295.
- Taylor, D. C., Barber, N. (2012). Measuring the influence of persuasion marketing on young wine consumers. *Journal of Food Products Marketing*, 18(1), 19-33.
- Thompson, C.J., Arsel, Z. (2004). The Starbucks brandscape and consumers' (anticorporate) experiences of globalization. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(3), 631-642.
- Thorbjørnsen, H., Pedersen, P.E., Nysveen, H. (2007). 'This is who I am': identity expressiveness and the theory of planned behavior. *Psychology & Marketing*, 24(9), 763-785.
- Twenge, J.M. (2006). *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled – and More Miserable than Ever Before*. New York: Free Press.
- Varul, M. Z. (2009). Ethical selving in cultural contexts: Fairtrade consumption as an everyday ethical practice in the UK and Germany. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 33, 183-18.
- Vermeir, I., Verbeke, W. (2008). Sustainable food consumption among young adults in Belgium: Theory of planned behavior and the role of confidence and values. *Ecological Economics*, 64(3), 542–553.
- Wicklund, R., Gollwitzer, P. (1982). *Symbolic selfcompletion*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zeller, R. A. (1993). Focus group research on sensitive topics: Setting the agenda without setting the agenda. In D. L. Morgan (Ed.), *Successful focus groups: Advancing the state of the art* (pp. 167-183). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.