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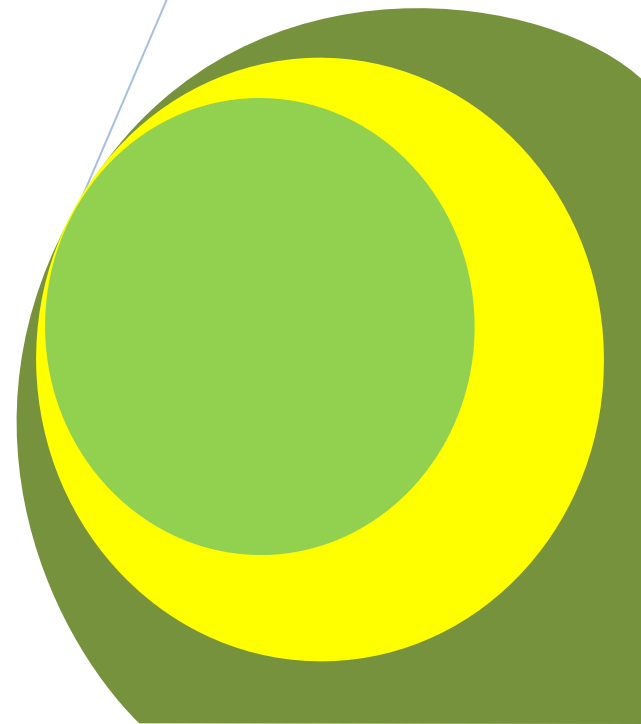
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Evaluating Product Ethics in Grocery Retailing: The View of Harare Customers

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Evaluating Product Ethics in Grocery Retailing: The View of Harare Customers

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ABSTRACT

While grocery retailers and other businesses in the developed world are now worried about green ethics and social responsibility, their counterparts in Zimbabwe are facing ethical complaints around the marketing of their products. A descriptive study conducted on whether Harare grocery retail customers were ethically satisfied by the products offered by grocery retailers was carried out with 210 customers taken from various suburbs in Harare. The sample was established through quota and systematic sampling methods. Product unethical practices were found to include selling old food, use of deceiving packaging volumes, weights and sizes, and mislabelled products. The study recommends grocery retailers to take product ethical audits twice per year. Consumers are recommended to report all unethical practices to the Consumer Council of Zimbabwe and to any other regulatory authorities. The government was recommended to heighten consumer education, implement anti-dumping policies and set laws that empower consumers.

Keywords: marketing mix, ethical values, ethical audit, grocery customers, grocery retailers.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

It is common in Zimbabwe to have consumers complain about the product state, pricing or promotional aspects. It is however, complaints on unethical products marketing that are awash in the Zimbabwean media to such an extent that the government has been called in to be vigilant on errant retailers. There have been stories of products being sold when they are expired and falsely labelled among other claims. All this mayhem set in with the product shortages era experience between 2008 and 2009 at the height of the Zimbabwe economic decline. As businesses faced operational challenges, customers were given a lower hand since the seller's market replaced the buyer's market. This made retailers to ignore following customer oriented marketing mix principles. One episode of product unethical practices is illustrated by a story contained in the Daily News on 28 May 2013 where a Harare man was demanding \$15, 000 from TM supermarket as compensation for damages suffered after he purchased and ate a sausage roll with a metal object in it.

While consumers are becoming more caring and socially aware of their rights and the need to defend their social values when shopping from grocery retailers in both developing and the developed world, Harare retailers seemed to be uncaring about it. Shaw and Clarke professed that a time will come when green consumers will be joined in the shopping revolution by a new breed of ethical buyers who demand quality products to be priced, promoted, distributed and serviced in ethical ways. The feelings of customers and their perceptions about grocery retailers need to be continuously investigated and communicated to relevant bodies and stakeholders.

The question of whether OK, TM-Pick'n Pay, Spars, Gutsai, Food World and other small shops in Zimbabwe are abiding to ethical product marketing is critical in this study. The main merchandise sold include dry edible groceries, dry inedible groceries, stationery, beverages, liquor, cosmetics, dairy, fruits, clothing section, kitchen wares, household products and deli section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Conceptual Framework of Marketing Mix Ethics.

Factors That Influence the Ethical Decision-Making Process

Individual factors, organisational relationships and opportunity are the three key factors that interact to determine ethical decisions in marketing (Dibb, Simkin, William and Ferrell, 1997).

Individuals are guided using moral philosophies like utilitarianism, deontology, ethical formalism, moral relativism, rights theory, divine command theory and ethical egoism (Ghillyer, 2008). It should be noted that throughout history, religion has been the richest source of values for individuals (Marta and Singhapakdi, 2005, Rossouw and Vuuren, 2011).

Organisational culture and structure operate through organisational relationships to influence ethical decisions (Mackinnon, 2009). Marketers resolve ethical issues not only on the basis of what they learned from their backgrounds, but also based on what they learn from others in the organisation. Professional codes of conduct and ethics related corporate policy also influence opportunity by prescribing what behaviours are acceptable in the company. The larger the rewards and the milder the punishment for unethical conduct, the greater is the likelihood that unethical behaviour will occur (Bailey, 2006).

Shaw and Clarke's Ethical Consumer Decision Making Process Model.

Focus group findings given by Shaw and Clarke (1999)'s research, established the following diagram with themes that touch on key issues of consumer ethics. Adressen (2001) also gave a similar ethics model which identifies actors, motives, offering, context, acts, audience and ethical consequences. However, in this case we only consider Shaw and Clarke's (1999) model. These items include the ethical issues, influences, actions and feelings. In rating grocery retailers, consumers will use these dimensions and themes.

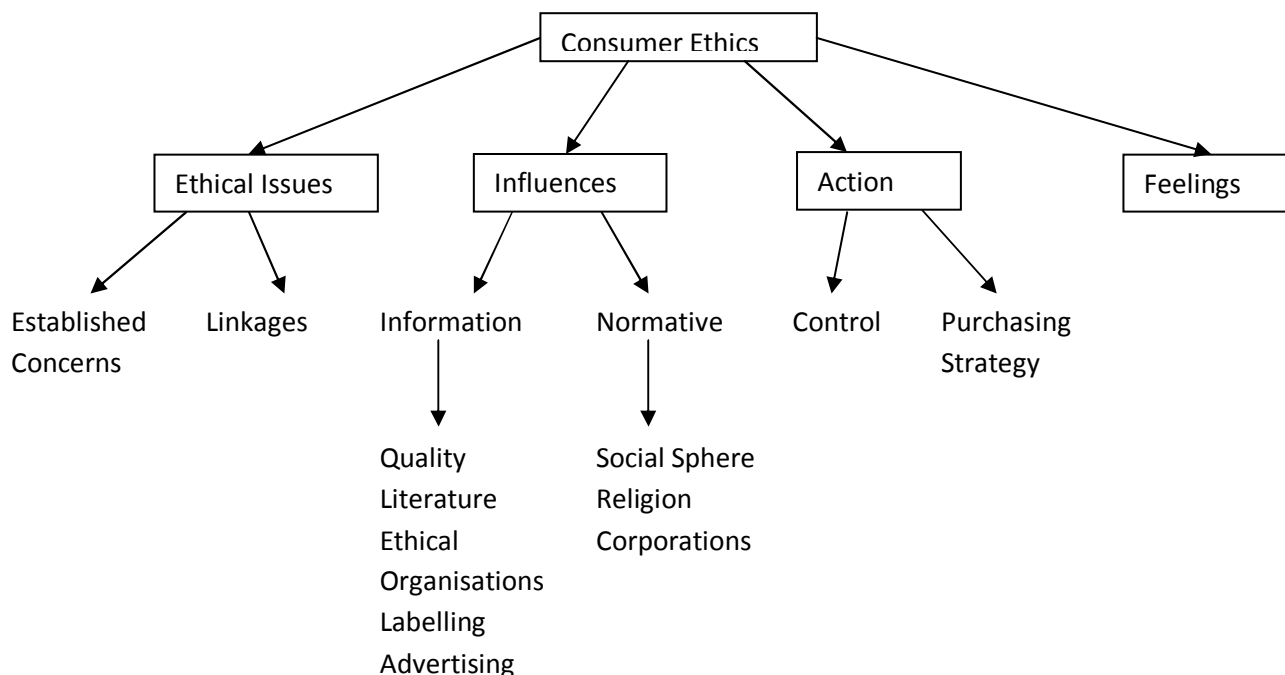


Fig Ethical Decision Making Process

The ethical perceptions and decision making by customers in grocery retailers is likely to follow the stages that start with ethical issues, influences, actions and then feelings. This is shown in Fig above. The stages are analysed below.

1. Ethical issues - Analysis of the focus groups revealed the existence of a number of "established" concerns important to ethical consumers (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). Such issues are in form of established concerns and linkages to some concerns and these could be on marketing mix, environment and social responsibility.

2. Influences - The main factors influencing ethical consumer beliefs related to a combination of the effect of information sources and normative factors (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). Information influences come from literature, ethical organisations, labelling and advertising. Normative influences involve social spheres which include religion, culture, education and corporations.

3. Action - Where choices are available, ethical criteria can be fairly habitual in decision making. Ethical consumers also have many "traditional" credentials on their shopping list and in this case the problem of behavioural control can arise (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). Customers will also choose purchasing strategies that achieve ethical values. The research at hand will establish a perception of ethical challenges that grocery consumers face in their buying activities around the product, pricing and promotional elements.

4. Feelings - Concern for ethical issues and attempts to display those concerns through consumption behaviour will trigger a series of emotions, comments, reactions and outcries (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). Such feelings are captured by the research questionnaire in the study.

Product Assortment in Grocery Shops and Ethical Issues

Product related ethical issues generally arise when manufacturers and grocery retailers fail to disclose risks associated with a product or information regarding the function, value or use of a product. Major issues covered include product safety and responsibility, deceptive packaging, organic and conventional food, product labelling and fair traded products (Shaw and Clarke, 1999).

Product Safety and Responsibility

Product safety and responsibility issues have led to bans on tobacco advertising, the setting up of independent bodies to protect consumers' interest in the food and drink industries, and reductions in the levels of fat, sugar and salt in many food and drink brands particularly the level of sugar in food and soft drinks consumed by children (Jobber, 2010).

In this study, product responsibility more specifically means that all products come with a full and complete list of content, that country of origin is stated, that the company will uphold its declarations of intent and assume liability for its products (Anselmsson and Johansson, 2007; DesJardins, 2014). Deceptive packaging also includes slack packaging and has the potential to deceive when the packaging is opaque. Package shape, graphic design and certain colours may be used to make a product appear larger than it actually is (Rundh, 2009; Shaw and Shiu, 2003). Products such as soap powders and breakfast cereals have the potential to suffer from slack packaging (Jobber, 2010; Hill and Tilley, 2002).

Although customers have traditionally liked attractive, effective and convenient packaging, the cost of such packaging is high. For some products, such as cosmetics, the cost of the package is higher than the cost of the product itself (Dibb et al., 1997). On organic and conventional food, Chryssochoidis (2000) demonstrated that consumers frequently struggle to differentiate between organic and conventional food. Our research confirms relatively high levels of consumer confusion among our respondents, which sometimes translates into a general scepticism towards environmental claims (Kumar, 2012). For example, to our respondents, the exact meanings of ecolabels, such as fair trade, no genetic engineering, sustainable agriculture, sustainable wood, or animal welfare, are not always clear (Carrete et al., 2012; Fortin and Renton, 2003).

Product labelling is widely regarded as the best tool to provide consumers with information about the social and environmental attributes of a brand (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Fliess et al., 2007; Howard and Allen, 2006; Carrero and Valor, 2012). Ethical issues also arise when marketers fail to inform customers about existing conditions or changes in product quality. This paradox becomes more critical if we take into account that retailers are also taking on the role of producers as they are developing their own labels that have achieved significant market shares (PLMA, 2011; Carrero and Valor, 2012).

Two papers (Nicholls, 2002; Jones et al., 2001) examined the introduction of Fair Trade labelled brands in an assortment of British retailers. Both suggested that labelling initiatives were a good option for introducing ethical products in mainstream stores (Carrero and Valor, 2012). In some cases, however, respondents claimed outright that companies and the media intentionally misinform consumers and lie about the implications and benefits of eco-friendly and fair traded products (Carrete et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2001).

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1:H1 There are ethical problems in product assortment of grocery retailers in Harare.

Hypothesis 2:H2 There are gender differences on the perception of product ethics in grocery retail outlets.

Hypothesis 3:H3 There are differences in product ethical perceptions between qualification levels.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design and sample

In answering the epistemological questions of what, where, how, when and why of knowledge, the researcher took a quantitative paradigm (Creswell, 2009; Hiller, 2010). This was achieved through a descriptive survey. The research subjects were in-store grocery consumers. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data. The objectives covered by the questionnaire centred on product ethics. The question items were of Likert scale, that rated perceptions of ethical issues in the 'strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree' (David, 2009). Open ended questions were also added to each objective.

To eliminate bias in the choice of respondents, systematic sampling was used. A sample size of 210 was obtained. The researchers interviewed respondents in the aisles of supermarkets. Gender representation was (116)55.22% males and 94(44.8%) females. It was easier to access males than females since the interviewers could easily find males outdoor at late hours. Majority of respondents 122(58.1%) were married, 36(17.1%) single parents and 52(24.8%) were single and not yet married. Non-managerial respondents were 128(61%), while self employed were 40(19%) and 42(20%) were of managerial positions. In terms of qualifications, a combined value of 69.6% of respondents had diplomas and degrees, while a combined value of 30.4% had A Level/certificates and below. On shopping experience in Harare, only 27.2% reported having interacted for 5 and below years with Harare grocery retailers, while 72.8% reported having shopping experience of 6 years and above. The majority of respondents 88(41.9%) lived in high density suburbs like Mabvuku –Tafara, Glenview, Budiro, Glen Norah, Kuwadzana, Mufakose and Kambuzuma. Medium density suburbs had 70(33.3%) coming from Hatfields, Belvedere, Avondale, Mabelreign, Mt Pleasant, Marlborough and Westgate. The low density 52(24.8%) respondents mainly came from Chisipite, Borrowdale and Gunhill. On income, 31.4% were in the US\$500 and below range, 47.2% in the US\$501-US\$1000 range and 21.4% being above US\$1000. The sample was made of respondents willing to answer the questionnaire.

Hypothesis testing

In hypothesis testing, the researcher used the t distribution and correlation analysis basing on means calculated from responses of 210 retail customers. In this analysis, we assume the means follows a normal distribution since they were derived from a statistically large sample. While the benchmark value for basic descriptions of ethical evaluations was 2.75, the hypothesised mean was taken to be 2.50 for the hypothesis testing. The 2.50 was derived from (half of 5) Likert scale average.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Product Assortment in Grocery Shops and Ethical Issues

The following is a table of results showing the mean values calculated basing on the 1-5 Likert scale rating and also the percentage of responses. The ethical issues in Table 1 are presented starting with the most troubling issue to the least troubling issue.

Table 1: Ethical Issues of Grocery Shops on Product Mix

	Mean	Rank	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree
1. Grocery retailers sell old food cooked in their in- store kitchens for some days.	2.10	1	34.8	33.3	20.5	9.5	1.9
2. Grocery retailers sell products with deceiving volumes, weight and sizes.	2.50	2	24.8	30.5	21.0	18.1	5.7
3. Grocery retailers sell some products without information on their usage and origin.	2.54	3	19.0	38.1	18.1	19.5	5.2
4. Grocery retailers sell GMO products that can have side effects on health.	2.61	4	26.7	24.3	20.0	19.5	9.5
5. Grocery retailers sell products that are expired.	2.69	5	18.1	32.4	19.5	22.4	7.6
6. Grocery retailers sell products that are of poor quality and not safe to use or consume	3.21	6	11.0	21.4	18.6	33.3	15.7

Source: Survey results 2013

N =210

Grocery retailers sell old food cooked in their in- store kitchens for some days (M=2.10)

Percentage analysis show that 68.1% of customers generally agreed to this statement. The food cooked by supermarkets is recycled for days, until it loses taste, freshness and nutrition value. It is the major cause of health expenses by customers due to diarrhoea and even cholera. They mix up the old meat with green vegetables to trick customers into believing that everything is new. Applying Kant's deontological theory will mean that such retailers should be banned or completely shut down for endangering customers' lives (SAGE, 2012).

Grocery retailers sell products with deceiving volumes, weight and sizes (M=2.50)

A significant mean value of 2.50 was derived from 210 respondents. This shows that many customers agreed to the statement. A mean value of 2.50 and a percentage value of 55.3% generally agreed that retailers offer products with deceiving volumes, weights and sizes. Products that are generally sold using slack packaging include cornflakes, powdered milk, potato crisps and other cereals (Jobber, 2010). Customers will be buying these expecting higher satisfactions than what is really offered by the contents. This is covered under deceptive packaging by Jobber (2010).

Grocery retailers sell some products without information on their usage and origin (M=2.54)

Selling products without information on their usage and origin assumes that customers are always conscious and they know everything and was found to be bad in the study. This deprives them on their right to be informed (Jobber, 2010). Products like bar soaps, vegetables, buns, meat, and tissue paper are sometimes seen without labels, but customers were being expected to buy even without basic information.

Grocery retailers sell GMO products that can have side effects on health (2.61)

There is evidence that genetically modified products are occupying some shelves of most grocery retailers in Harare (M=2.61). Such product categories include milk, grapes, chicken meat, soya bean milk, and some fish (Kumar, 2012).

Grocery Retailers Are Selling Products That Are Expired (M=2.69)

This could be caused by stocking products not wanted by customers and taking time to sell these. Some retailers could be doing it to avoid loss and inconvenience of returning back to suppliers or destroying such goods. Such products sold after expiry dates include canned meat, biscuits, imported juice drinks, snacks and chocolates and bread.

Grocery retailers sell products that are of poor quality and not safe to use or consume(M=3.21)

Consumers generally felt that many products sold by grocery retailers meet the quality and basic safety levels (M=3.21). This rating could be supported by moral relativists as given by Jennings (2012).

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: General Product Ethics

H1: There are ethical problems in product assortment of grocery retailers in Harare.

Results: $t_{\text{Critical}}=2.02$; $t_{\text{Calculated}}=0.74$; $\text{Alpha}=0.05$.

Conclusion: Since the $t_{\text{cal}} < 2.02$, we accept H_1 and conclude that there are ethical problems in terms of product assortment of grocery retailers in Harare at $\alpha = 0.05$, level of significance. This requires grocery retailers to stock products that are ethical in customers' view.

Hypothesis 2: Gender Differences and Product Ethics

H2: There are gender differences on the perception of product ethics in grocery retail outlets.

Table 2: Paired Samples Correlations

			N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Male & Female		6	.944	.005

Conclusion:

We accept H_0 and conclude that both men and women felt the product assortment in retail outlets were unethical.

Hypothesis 3: Qualification Levels and Product Ethics

H3: There are differences in product ethical perceptions between qualification levels.

Table 3: Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	O'level and below & Diploma	6	.921	.009
Pair 2	A'level/Certificate & Degree and above	6	.959	.002

Conclusion:

Since $r=0.921$; $p=0.009$ and $r=0.959$; $p=0.002$ for pair 1 and pair 2 respectively, we accept H_0 and conclude there are no differences in ethical perception between qualification levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Given that grocery retailers sell old food from their kitchens, sell GMOs, sell expired products, sell products without information labels and sell products with deceiving volumes, weights and sizes, we can conclude that customers are

generally exposed to unethical practices. Their health and lives could be in danger in the short or long term. It is concluded that the most troublesome product unethical issue is selling of old food from the kitchen.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The supermarkets in Harare and the whole country should continually carry out ethical audits on product safety and customer service satisfaction.
- Consumers should study much about consumer rights. Such areas include right to safety, right to get redress, right to information and rights to safe environments. These are found in the internet and Consumer Council of Zimbabwe offices. Retail customers should also read articles published in the local papers about consumer issues.
- Consumers should not only make decisions in isolation but stand in solidarity with other consumers. Tell relatives and friends to stop buying from a particular retailer felt to be behaving unethically. Take action and create awareness such as writing articles to newspapers about unethical experiences to share with other consumers.
- The government should test and inspect incoming products, imposing duty and quotas on imported products to deter entry of sub-standard products.
- The government should empower the consumer watchdog to become a statutory or regulatory body that deals with consumer issues more efficiently. This involves setting policies and laws that support and empower consumers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Competing interests for the authors are that both have had nasty experiences with products purchased from some of the shops included in the study. This in one way or the other might have interfered with the way in which results were presented.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The two authors participated equally in the study save for the fact that the corresponding author conceived the study area. The two authors were equally active in research design, data analysis, interpretation and drafting of the final article.

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