

An Exploratory Study into the Factors Impeding Ethical Consumerism

ABSTRACT Evidence suggests that consumers are increasingly aware of, engaged with, and influenced by ethical factors when forming opinions on products and making purchase decisions. Despite this, a number of recent studies have highlighted significant differences between consumers' intention to consume ethically, and their actual purchase behaviour. This paper contributes to an understanding of the factors contributing to this 'Ethical Purchasing Gap'. A model of the impeding factors to ethical consumption is constructed based upon a review of existing literature, and the inductive analysis of focus group discussions. While exogenous variables such as Moral Maturity and Age are well covered in the literature, a further range of impeding factors have been identified as important. For some consumers, such is their purchasing inertia that the decision making process is devoid of any ethical considerations. For others, ethical views are displayed through post purchase dissonance and retrospective feelings such as guilt. Some consumers display a reluctance to consume ethically due to personal constraints, a perceived negative impact on image or quality or an outright negation of responsibility. For many, the desire to consume ethically is conveyed, yet their cynicism, together with an external locus of control, deters them because they question the impact they, as an individual, can achieve. It is important that future research examines each of the factors identified here to better understand consumers purchasing behaviour in this context.

KEY WORDS: Ethical consumption; attitude-behaviour gap; fair-trade.

Introduction

It is commonly stated that ethical consumerism is growing (Berry and McEachern, 2005; Davis, 2006; Nicholls, 2002; Webster, 2000). In its long running longitudinal study the Co-operative bank has shown sales of ethical goods rising at around 15% a year to stand at £35.5bn in 2007 (Clavin, 2008). Such growth patterns undoubtedly show great potential, however still only represent a very small proportion of the overall consumer market of some £600bn (Macalister, 2007).

Previous research has identified a so called 'Ethical Purchasing Gap'(Nicholls and Lee, 2006), 'Attitudes Behaviour Gap' (Kim, Forney *et al.*, 1997), or 30:3 syndrome whereby approximately a 'third of consumers profess to care about companies' policies and records on social responsibility, but ethical products rarely achieve more than 3% market share' (Cowe and Williams, 2000). This phenomenon suggests that while ethical awareness and engagement might be widespread, most of the time this is not being translated into purchasing action. While research into ethical consumption has increased significantly in recent years, few studies have explored the factors that prevent the vast majority of consumers from purchasing in line with their ethical values.

Ethical consumption

Many authors have commented on the difficulty in defining ethical behaviour (Singhapakdi, Vitell *et al.*, 1999; KPMG and Synovate, 2007), ethical retailing (Whysall, 1998) and ethical consumption (Howard and Nelson, 2000; Cherrier, 2005; Clavin and Lewis, 2005). There are a plethora of issues which could be questioned ethically; however such assessments can be highly subjective and complexly interlinked (Cherrier, 2005; Kent, 2005). Ethical considerations can even be contradictory for example the desire to ‘reduce food miles and support developing countries’ (KPMG and Synovate, 2007; p. 2). Despite these challenges, a number of common ethical issues do emerge from the literature: Fair Trade principles (Loureiro and Lotade, 2005; Nicholls and Opal, 2005; DePelsmacker and Janssens, 2007); use of Organically grown and processed materials (Tomolillo and Shaw, 2004; Shaw, hogg *et al.*, 2006; Tsakiridou, Boutsouki *et al.*, 2008); working practices in developing nations (Dickson, 1999; Anniss, 2003; Joergens, 2006) and depletion of natural resources (Ford, Nonis *et al.*, 2005; Sanfilippo, 2007).

Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993) define ethical consumer behaviour as ‘decision making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer’s ethical concerns’ p. 113.

Two prominent approaches have been used in the examination of ethical consumer behaviour, that based upon Hunt and Vitell's general theory of marketing ethics (Hunt and Vitell, 1986), and work that draws on the attitudinal model presented by Ajzen and Fishbein, and Ajzen (Chatzidakis, Hibbert *et al.*, 2006). These models suggest that consumers make decisions through a process of knowledge formation, the construction of attitudes or judgments about a particular consumption activity’s ethical impact, the formation of purchase intentions and finally purchase. Factors relevant to ethical consumption such as ‘Self Identity’ and ‘Ethical Obligation’ were reported to act upon both attitude formation, and purchase intentions, but not directly on purchase action (Shaw, Shiu *et al.*, 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2002; Sparks, Shepherd *et al.*, 1995; Sparks and Guthrie, 1998). Given that such a wide difference is reported between consumer attitudes and final purchase behaviour, a wide range of currently unreported impeding factors may exist.

Studies have identified some variables that can influence ethical decision making such as age, religious beliefs (Hegarty and Simms, 1978) and moral maturity (Kohlberg, 1969). McDevitt *et al.*, (2007) also suggests variables related to the personal beliefs and confidence of the

individual may also be relevant. Strong decision makers will be confident in following their judgement especially when required to take individual action. The attributes of confidence and moral maturity in the context of ethical decision-making can be closely linked to the work of Forte (2004) on the locus of control (Rotter, 1954). Consumers with an external locus of control believe ethical dilemmas are beyond their control whereas research by Singhapakdi and Vitell (1991) shows that people with an internal locus of control are more likely to take action to settle ethical problems and defy social pressure to make unethical decisions.

A small number of factors have previously been identified as impeding ethical consumption: limited availability of ethical products (Nicholls and Lee, 2006); the consumer being bombarded with too many messages (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001); inertia in consumption choices (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000); and consumer mistrust and possible scepticism of ethical symbols (Nicholls and Lee, 2006). Further, (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001) state that ‘it would appear consumers do not wish to be inconvenienced’, suggesting that consumers will only make ethical purchases if it does not mean they have to pay more, suffer loss of quality or have to make a specific effort. These suggestions have, however, been made as part of research either into a specific context, or as broad papers into ethical consumption, none being specifically focused on the identification of possible inhibitors to purchase.

Methodology

An inductive approach was adopted to enable a range of impeding factors to emerge. Given the complex nature of the subject area, focus group discussions were most appropriate, enabling the issues to be debated, fully explored, and the widest possible range of factors to be identified.

One of the possible reasons for the attitude-behaviour gap is thought to be the ‘social desirability bias’ in the research design of many studies (Cowe and Williams, 2000). The problem of social desirability bias is well covered in the literature, with Clavin describing the issue as an:

‘over reporting of ethical actions by research respondents seeking to give the 'right' answer.’

Focus groups were carefully constructed and moderated to minimise this potential effect. Three focus groups were conducted, each containing six participants. This small group size was used due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and to minimise the potential for social desirability bias (Falconer, 1976). Participants were selected according to convenience, but an equal gender mix and broad age range were assured.

All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, including, where appropriate, notes on tonality, hesitation and intonation. After a period of data immersion, open and axial coding was used to develop a template of factors that emerged. This template was refined further through a repetitious process of coding and recoding to ensure robustness of the findings.

Data analysis and findings

Seven key themes emerged from the data, each contributing part of an explanation into why consumer attitudes are not translated into purchasing behaviour.

Price sensitivity

Price was a reoccurring theme, with consumers suggesting that they care more about value in financial terms than ethical values. With particular reference to food and other frequently purchased items it was nearly always the consumers' first consideration. One participant stated:

‘I don't even consider ethical products in a supermarket because it is a bill you pay weekly and you need it to be as small as possible.’

When members discussed the occasional time when they had purchased the ethical alternative and not considered the price, a high level of post-purchase dissonance was experienced and this resulted, in some cases, in a future permanent avoidance of ethical products. One example given was with reference to purchasing fair-trade tea and coffee in the workplace, the inflated price was held responsible for a return to old habits.

The consensus amongst participants was that they did care about ethical issues and were willing to pay slightly more, but beyond a small premium, their cynicism surfaced. They were reluctant to pay more than a few pence extra for goods where they saw no significant tangible reward to their efforts.

A little bit more, yes I am expected to pay, I wouldn't mind paying a bit more but when you've got [a] limited amount of money to spend each week, you can't afford these things

The price appeared less of an issue with regard to locally produced goods. Participants were able to quantify the premium asked and understand, in a familiar context, how the extra pence could be justified. This suggests that the vicarious nature of ethical issues hinders the consumers' attachment and commitment to their beliefs.

Despite this stated focus on price, some participants appeared more attached to their habitual purchasing than they realised. When faced with a situation where price considerations were removed, it did not immediately result in the purchasing of ethical products as was initially implied.

Personal experience

Due to the emotive nature of ethical consumerism, participants seemed most receptive to changes in their habitual purchasing when it impacted them personally or when a particular story grabbed their attention, forcing them to deliberate on the subject. McDevitt *et al.* (2007) implied that the biggest hurdle to ethical consumerism was getting the consumer to recognise that their imminent actions could be ethical or unethical. One member stated:

If it is not in your eye, if it is not put straight in your face, eventually you will just forget about it and go back to your day-to-day business until it comes up again

Participants were most vocal with regard to negative stories they had been exposed to and in most cases expressed concern. Positive information did not generate as much interest; it was often viewed with cynicism and therefore was less likely to affect purchase decisions. This supports Herr *et al.* (1991) who asserted that consumers' attitudes are influenced more by negative information than positive.

When asked, participants said they did not consume ethically as an alternative to giving to charity. However, it became apparent that with regard to personal experiences, group members made links between consumption and charitable donations. Any desire or obligation to consume ethically was reduced if they had had encountered a bad experience when giving to charity. An example of this was the Tsunami of 2005: a number of participants had donated generously to the relief fund only for it to be reported that the money was not reaching the people for whom it was intended. This transferred into their ethical purchasing behaviour which favoured purchasing local produce to fair-trade goods as they could have greater confidence that it was making a difference.

Ethical obligation

Participants understood the link between their ethical purchasing and their values, and constantly maintained they would like to make a difference. However, as discussion evolved, it became apparent there was an underlying reluctance to help, but a feeling of obligation.

The ethical obligation of group members seemed to centre on suppressing a conscience. On many occasions it was suggested that it was too difficult, for many reasons, to 'tow a purely ethical line' however the obligation to 'do your bit' was still strong, particularly when the price was comparable.

Individuals' perception of what was considered ethical varied significantly, for one member, a vegetarian; it was categorically unethical to consume a chicken. Another participant commented that they:

[...] would be a vegetarian but at the end of the day they are still going to kill all the animals.

This variation in levels of obligation can be aligned with Forte's recent work around the locus of control (2004). The vegetarian expressed an internal locus of control, believing that their actions could make a difference, (Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1991) whereas the second respondent displayed an a prominent external locus of control, believing that any change in their consumption pattern would not have any impact; this view being used to justify their existing behaviour.

Lack of information

It is argued that in order for consumers to make efficient decisions they must be fully informed (Sproles *et al.* 1978). Although there is now far more information in the public domain regarding ethical practices (Jones *et al.*, 2007) this research has found that consumers still believe they do not have enough knowledge to make ethical decisions.

In some focus groups, a preference to hear about unethical practices was expressed. It was felt that to be informed and then avoid unethical options or companies was more achievable than to proactively purchase the most ethical product.

‘I think you would be turned off from the unethical one if there had been loads of bad stories, but this wouldn’t necessarily push you towards the most ethical one.’

This opinion presents implications for the future of intrinsically ethical brands, but also highlights difficulties in measuring the scope of ethical purchases, indicating a need for the monitoring of sales of products and brands that have been the subject of negative ethical publicity, and products considered intermediaries to truly understand the effect ethical beliefs are having on consumption behaviour.

Although participants acknowledged the enormity of the problem and in contrast, the luxury of their own lifestyles, they suggested that unless it was pushed upon them and they were made to listen, their lack of knowledge would continue to render low levels of ethical consumption.

Quality perception

Quality perception was a reoccurring theme throughout the research yet took two clear forms. For some participants, products branded fair-trade were perceived as poorer quality. Conversely, others believed ethical goods such as free-range chicken tasted nicer and it was their quest for quality that inadvertently drove them to consume ethically.

The group members who did not consume ethically felt that unethical goods could not be bad quality or harmful because as one participant highlighted. ‘They are not going to be poisonous to you if the government has passed them as safe to eat’. This viewpoint can be aligned to that of Carrigan and Attalla (2001) who highlighted the perceived synonymy

between 'ethical' and 'legal' and indicated that consumers deem 'acting within the law' to be adequate.

The perceived quality of ethical goods emerged as a clear influencing factor in the decision making process concurring with the findings of Carrigan and Attalla (2001) who state that consumers will not tolerate a loss in quality in order to purchase ethically.

Purchasing inertia

During the focus group it became clear that although factors such as price and quality were prominent barriers to consumption; far stronger was the purchasing inertia of the individuals, it was ultimately this that prevented any change, or even consideration of change, to their consumption patterns. This finding supports Boulstridge and Carrigan's (2000) view that consumers will not change their behaviour and become more ethical until the alternative has no negative impact upon them.

The sheer strength of inertia and subsequent brand loyalty became apparent when the participants were asked to disregard the price of products. It had initially been expressed as the key factor, but group members found themselves admitting that their allegiance to certain brands would always hinder their ability to move towards the ethical option. 'I am a Heinz person'; 'PG tips, everyone has their own tea'; and 'Got to have your Weetabix in the morning' were common responses. This strong attachment was not necessarily something the consumer believed was correct but something that they had come to accept.

Cynicism

A high level of cynicism toward ethical claims was found amongst consumers as a key driver of their reluctance to consume ethically. Participants believed they were being coldly marketed to and their goodwill taken advantage of through the application of disproportionate price premiums. Demonstrating the prominent conflict with the concept of morality when attempting to relate ethical practice to the business of making money (Nash, 1990). It is suggested that consumers will disrespect any attempt to apply an ethical layer to their marketing without sincere underlying values. This scepticism of corporate motivations behind ethical stances was recognised by participants, with one commenting: 'It's purely for company profit. I think it begins and ends there'.

Participants in all focus groups suggested that a key factor, in deciding to disregard ethical products was that they did not believe the extra effort required on their part, (Shaw and Shiu,

2003) was transferred completely to the end benefactor; presuming instead, that a proportion was intercepted by corporate or governmental organisations.

There was acknowledgement by a number of Participants not only of the growing trend to communicate about ethical practices, for competitive advantage, but also of the rising number of emerging news stories about pockets of malpractice. One group member exclaimed ‘These multinationals, you can find a story associated with all of them’. Participants cynicism was fuelled by a lack of information about the benefits of ethical practices combined with an excess of information about unethical practices, leading to confusion and perceived vulnerability.

Guilt

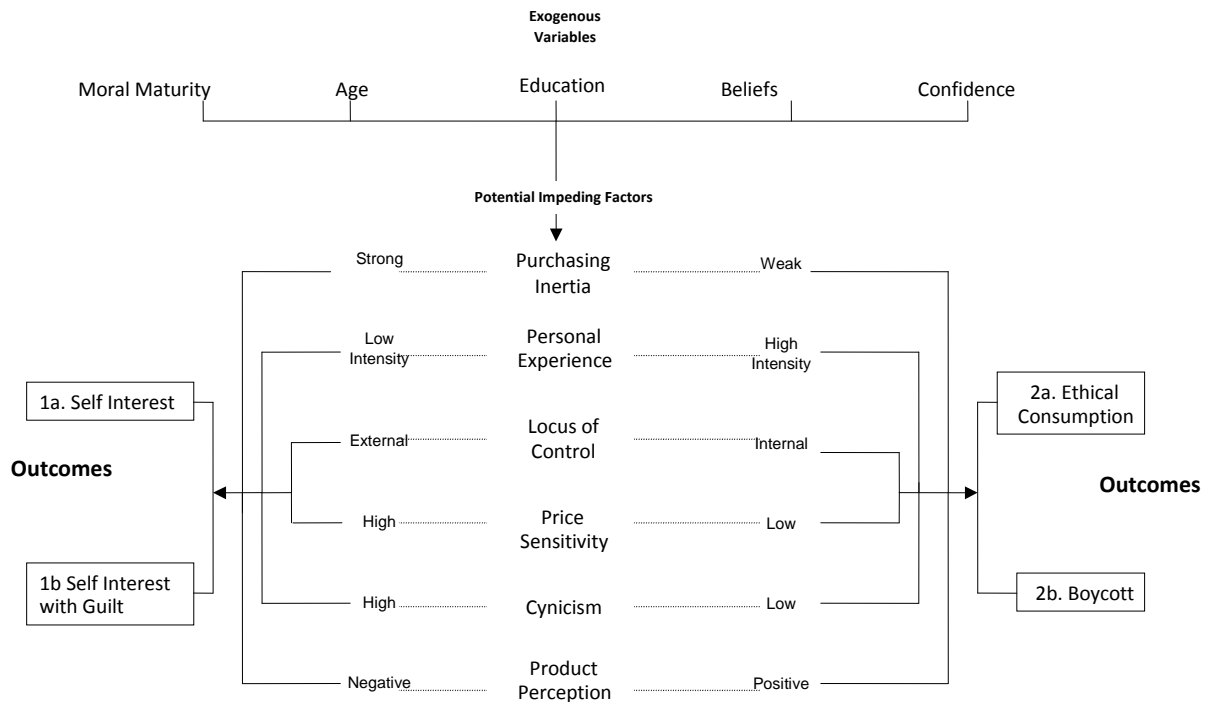
Although Hall (2007) suggests that consumers have evolved past a sense of guilt to identification and solidarity with others, focus group discussions suggest that this is not universal. Guilt is still a factor but is often a retrospective feeling following the choice not to purchase ethical goods.

There was a clear trend amongst participants to suppress their feelings of guilt through conveying doubt as to whether or not, their purchase would have actually made a difference; this seeming to be an attempt to neutralise the guilt (Chatzidakis, Hibbert *et al.*, 2007). Although guilt was a reoccurring theme throughout the research it was not an early part of the decision-making process, but something considered following the purchase and then, in the majority of cases dismissed.

Conclusion

The complexity of the subject suggests that the impeding factors identified and discussed cannot be placed in a generic hierarchy as different consumers can feel the impact of individual factors or combinations and not necessarily consider all in the same logical manner. It must be considered that most factors are interdependent and expressed in different ways and to varying degrees, by different consumers. Figure 1 below summarises the impeding factors to ethical consumption that have been identified.

Fig. 1 Model of the Impeding Factors to Ethical Consumerism



Due to the limited scope of the study it is not possible to claim that this depiction is comprehensive, however it does present the first conceptualisation of the key impeding factors that may explain the 30:3 problem outlined in the literature. While a multiplicity of consumption choices might be made, for clarity these have been grouped as Self Interest, Self Interest with Guilt, Boycott and Ethical Consumption. Two ‘ethical’ outcomes are highlighted, acknowledging that for many consumers, the intermediary was often chosen following a boycott of the unethical option.

An important aspect of ethical consumerism has been found to be post purchase dissonance, in the form of guilt at not opting for the ethical alternative. For most people price appears as a key barrier to consuming ethically. Consumers believe the benefactor from their ethical choices should be the producer or underpaid labourer but are cynical, suggesting that many corporate organisations profit from such products. Consumers question the quality of ethical goods, with the exception of fresh food; most fair-trade products were viewed to be of inferior quality. The common perception is that if a company is first and foremost focused on achieving an ethical product then it is likely to be of lower quality. Consumers are also

heavily brand loyal and image conscious. When other tangible factors such as price are ignored, brand loyalty and purchasing inertia still prevents them, in many cases, from trying an ethical alternative.

This paper has identified a range of factors that might prevent consumers from converting their ethical attitudes into ethical purchase decisions, and in so doing provides a useful step forward in understanding consumer behaviour in this regard. It is clear however that this study should represent only the start of research in this area, with each individual factor that has been identified here warranting individual examination, and other general studies may uncover further impeding factors that will build knowledge into these phenomena.

Implications for retailers

Given consumers cynicism toward ethical claims, it is unlikely that positioning on this criterion alone will be attractive to a mass-market group. However, it is essential for all retailers to ensure that their practices are appropriate and well controlled as the damage that can be caused by any publicity highlighting ethically questionable behaviour throughout the supply chain is significant.

The concept of ethical consumerism appears secondary to the strongest attribute of choice. Whether it is a retailer who is focused on price or a brand that is focused on quality products, an ethical approach must work only to reinforce integrity; consumers do not feel strongly enough yet to prioritise it above the other attributes they associate with their habitual purchasing.

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