



Understanding ethical grocery shoppers[☆]

Juliet Memery^{*}, Philip Megicks¹, Robert Angell², Jasmine Williams

Plymouth Business School, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth, Devon, PL4 8AA UK

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ABSTRACT

The growing importance of ethical shopping motives offers a major advantage to retailers who understand their significance in store choice decisions compared with other conventional store image influences, particularly with regard to any variations that exist between different shopper types. This study uses an exploratory two-phase integrative qualitative and quantitative research design to identify a preliminary classification of ethical shopper types. Three ethical and three store image factors emerge as relevant to the decision-making of ethical shoppers through the development of appropriate scales. Building from these factors, subsequent cluster analysis defines four distinct ethical shopper types: demanders, mavens, dissenters, and apathetics. The degree of emphasis given to ethical and other store choice factors exemplify differences among these segments. The article discusses the utility of the resultant classification in terms of research and retail strategy including opportunities for targeting through adjustment of the retail offer.

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1. Introduction

This research proposes that, in light of the growing importance of ethical motives in shopping behavior (Harrison et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2008), an advantage accrues to retailers through understanding the nature of such motives in comparison with motives relating to conventional store image factors, and variations in their importance to different customers when buying. Investigation of the different facets of ethical shopping motives, together with store image considerations and behavioral and demographic characteristics of consumers, enables the proposition of a preliminary classification of ethical shopper types.

The research contributes to understanding contemporary shopping motivations and provides insights into how consumers are segmentable using ethical motives. The theoretical and practical implications for retailers are presented along with limitations of the research and subsequent avenues for further inquiry.

2. Shopping motives and the ethical dimension

The retailing literature includes an array of shopping motives (e.g., Arnold et al., 1983; Mitchell, 2001; Tauber, 1972) that characterize individual aspects of the consumers' pre-purchase and purchase behavior. Previous studies propose that reasons for shopping extend

beyond provisioning (Miller, 1998) to include wider non-utilitarian motives founded on hedonic satisfaction seeking behavior (Babin et al., 1994). However, only limited research to date concerns itself with another of the key drivers of contemporary shopping, namely ethical consumption (e.g., Cowe and Williams, 2001; Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008).

The Co-operative Bank (2009) confirms the significance of this emerging trend with expenditure on ethically-produced goods and services in the UK almost trebled since 1999 with an annual value in excess of £36 billion. Business sector research identifies over eight in ten shoppers are interested in ethical shopping in the UK (IGD, 2008). Yet no recent research comprehensively investigates the range of ethical motivations that contribute to consumers' decision-making, how these compare with mainstream shopping criteria when making ethical shopping choices, and their relative importance to different retail customers.

The UK ethical food market is growing rapidly with an annual value of over £6.0 billion in 2008 (IGD, 2010) and reflects a broad set of influences relating to increasingly important ethical issues in consumer food and grocery shopping decisions (Anderson and Cunningham, 1972; Balderjahn, 1988; Roberts, 1996). Although Crane and Matten (2003) recognize that summing up the full range of ethical factors in ethical consumption is difficult, other studies provide more comprehensive understanding through empirical investigation (e.g., Szmigin and Carrigan, 2005).

A growing number of consumers are no longer just concerned with the satisfaction they obtain from a product, but also want to be comfortable with its method of production (Nantel and Weeks, 1996; Peattie, 1990). These consumers are willing to invest financially to acquire such products and to support retailers who act in an ethical manner. For example, consumers will pay more for social product

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^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1752 585626.

E-mail addresses: juliet.memery@plymouth.ac.uk (J. Memery), phil.megicks@plymouth.ac.uk (P. Megicks), robert.angell@plymouth.ac.uk (R. Angell), jasmine.williams@plymouth.ac.uk (J. Williams).

¹ Tel.: +44 1752 585707.

² Tel.: +44 1752 585727.

features (Auger et al., 2003); a niche group of “ethical consumers” are willing-to-pay a premium for ethical products (Mohr and Webb, 2005); corporate social responsibility issues affect consumers’ purchase intentions more strongly than price (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005); and ethical consumers’ in the food sector have particular concerns about environmental, human rights, and animal welfare issues when making purchase decisions (Wheale and Hinton, 2007).

Many studies of ethical shopping explain awareness of ethical issues from a specific perspective despite the level of interest in the more general implications of ethics for consumer behavior (e.g., Jackson, 2005; Klein, 2000). Some research considers demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as age (Carrigan et al., 2004), gender (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996), and personal characteristics such as locus of control, alienation, conservatism, dogmatism, values, and consciousness (Balderjahn, 1988; Crosby et al., 1981; McEachern et al., 2007; Shaw et al., 2005). Few investigations examine the plethora of factors that comprise ethical buying behavior and those that do concentrate on either a single issue of concern or one product category. The research presented here is influenced by broader investigations such as Strong’s (1997) study of Fair Trade products and Shaw and Clarke’s (1999) study of the growth in ethical consumerism to provide a wide-ranging investigation of ethical factors that influence grocery shopping as well as an assessment of the significance of these factors to wider retail and consumer behavior literature.

Shoppers’ motives relating to perceived importance of specific constructs of the retail offer sometimes affect store choice (Zimmer and Golden, 1988). Similarly, products have tangible and intangible brand characteristics (Aaker, 1992) critical to purchase decisions within stores. The physical characteristics of grocery products are not the sole influence on consumers’ shopping decisions. Grocery brand “signaling” of quality together with other wider criteria such as physical appearance, packaging, price, and reputation of the retailer (Vranešević and Stančec, 2003) plays an important role. Retail brands (such as the UK’s Co-Op, which has been proactive in driving ethical shopping) demonstrate this signal through their use as consumers’ “choice editors” (SDC, 2006) from an ethical standpoint by filtering out ethically incompatible products on behalf of their customers and thereby simplifying customer decision-making. These retailers perceive themselves as ethical “brands” because their values, positioning, and behavior influences store choice positively amongst shoppers with a predisposition to seek-out ethical products.

3. Shopper typologies

A strongly developed characteristic of shopping research literature focuses on segmenting retail consumers into shopper types usually through a taxonomic approach from empirical data using cluster analysis. These segments are generally based on shopping motivations and other characteristics such as benefits sought, behavior and attitude and developed in a number of contexts ranging from traditional retail surroundings such as shopping malls (e.g., Bellenger and Korgaonkar, 1980) to contemporary on-line shopping environments (e.g., Rohm and Swaminathan, 2004). Such typologies provide insights into differences in behavior and enable retailers to develop effective targeting strategies, by differentiating their offer to take account of the motivational differences and personal characteristics of their consumers. Stone (1954), in his classification of department store shoppers in the US based on qualitative investigation, recognizes both economic and social motivations as important and interestingly, identifies an ethical group amongst the four shopper types (the others being economic, personalizing, and apathetic shoppers). This early research is supported by Darden and Reynolds (1971) using the more sophisticated quantitative methodology of factor and cluster analysis (based on store attributes and psychographics) to identify ethical shoppers who are “moralistic” in their “support for local merchants” as a defined shopping type of US supermarket shopper, along with “quality oriented”, “fastidious”,

“convenience”, “demanding”, “trading stamp collectors”, “stamp avoiders” and “apathetic” types. Seminal research on urban department store shopping in the US by Westbrook and Black (1985) proposes both product and experiential motives as being critical in determining their six shopper segments, whilst Jarratt (1996), in her study of Australian rural shoppers, uses motives for purchasing behavior based on the shopping offer, shopping environment and service, to identify “have to”, “practical”, “service”, “experiential”, “moderate” and “product-focused” types. Arnold and Reynolds (2003) more recently investigate hedonic shopping motivations of US shoppers in stores and malls, and recognize “minimalists”, “gatherers”, “providers”, “enthusiasts”, and “traditionalists” as the six different clusters of hedonically-motivated customers. This article presents a timely counterpoint to this latter work to propose that shoppers can be clustered into different shopper types using a range of motivations including those identified as ethical, in addition to conventional store choice motives.

4. Research method

The study includes a two-phase integrative qualitative and quantitative research design that enables measures for ethical shopping influences as well as conventional retail image factors to be contextually developed. Qualitative inquiries were carried out to establish the range of ethical motives influencing grocery shopping, and to provide deep insights into their significance in conjunction with other retail variables, when shoppers make store choice decisions. Subsequent quantitative analysis was employed to develop scales for measuring ethical and store image shopping factors, and to assess their contribution to understanding consumers’ grocery shopping choices.

4.1. Qualitative phase

Exploratory research of grocery shoppers was conducted through seven focus groups (46 respondents in total). These took place in cities and rural market towns in the South West of England, chosen to capture a cross-section of shopping patterns and competitive conditions. In order to achieve a breadth of understanding of motives, respondents in the sample were selected to reflect the demographic profile of UK grocery shoppers generally, and filtered to include only those with ethical predispositions based on characteristics identified from past literature (e.g., Crosby et al., 1981; CWS Ltd, 2000; Hopper and Nielsen, 1991; Prothero, 1996). Hence the sample composition is predominantly, although not solely, female with children in the family (e.g., Balderjahn, 1988; Minton and Rose, 1997; Roberts, 1996), and from medium to higher socio-economic groupings (Arbuthnot, 1977; Kinneer et al., 1974; Van Liere and Dunlap, 1980). A discussion outline was adopted using several structured questions at the outset (Krueger, 1994) to establish customer shopping behaviors such as frequency, location, etc. After this, the discussion became more spontaneous, but was directed towards influences on shopping behavior in the form of both ethical and conventional store image factors.

Whilst the unstructured approach taken (after initial questions) may be seen as aiding exploration of the topic by some, this ‘looseness’ of structure has been criticized by others for its inability to assist in the generation of a list of attributes (Claxton et al., 1980). To overcome this, respondents were asked to fill out a grid at the end of the session identifying and ranking the ten most important issues to them when making their grocery shopping decisions, from those that were discussed. This exercise is a method that had been used for clarification of similar issues in prior research (Shaw and Clarke, 1999).

The discussions were recorded and transcribed, and content analysis used to categorize key ethical concerns and shopping behaviors (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), using the techniques of Manifest Coding and Latent Coding (Neuman, 1994).

The qualitative research findings indicate the presence of 25 ethical issues relating to grocery shopping and 23 store image issues.

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