



Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research



Lost in translation: Exploring the ethical consumer intention–behavior gap[☆]

Michal J. Carrington^{a,*}, Benjamin A. Neville^b, Gregory J. Whitwell^c

^a La Trobe University, Australia

^b University of Melbourne, Australia

^c University of New South Wales, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 January 2012

Received in revised form 1 August 2012

Accepted 1 September 2012

Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Ethical consumerism

Intention–behavior gap

Ethnography

Prioritization

Habits

Implementation intentions

ABSTRACT

Ethical consumerism is a burgeoning movement, yet ethically-minded consumers rarely purchase ethically. Understanding obstacles to ethical consumption is limited. This study explores the underlying mechanics of the ethical purchase intention–behavior gap in the context of consumers' daily lives. The study employs multiple qualitative methods across multiple sites, explores the intention–behavior gap in observed modes of shopping behavior, and uses an interpretive approach. The analysis reveals four interrelated factors affecting the ethical intention–behavior gap: (1) prioritization of ethical concerns; (2) formation of plans/habits; (3) willingness to commit and sacrifice; and (4) modes of shopping behavior. Awareness of these four factors provides both strategic and tactical implications for marketing managers seeking to reach the elusive ethical consumer. Understanding and enhancing ethical consumption – closing the gap – has positive outcomes for the future sustainability of economies, societies and environments.

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1. Introduction

Ethical consumerism is a burgeoning social movement. Mainstream consumers increasingly express concerns about the ethicality and impact of their consumption choices upon the environment, animals and/or society (De Pelsmacker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2005; Shaw & Shui, 2002). For example, recent UK market data, suggests the ethical food and drink market represents 8% of the total food and drink market (Cooperative Bank, 2009). Despite embracing the values of ethical consumerism, most consumers rarely support their beliefs at the check-out counter (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk, Devinney, & Eckhardt, 2005; Szmigin, Carrigan, & McEachern, 2009). For example, 89% of UK consumers report they have ethical issues of concern (Lazzarini & de Mello, 2001), however, a 2005 study reports that only 30% of UK consumers convert these concerns into ethical purchase intentions, and only 3% actually purchase ethical products (Futerra Sustainability Communications Ltd, 2005).

Researchers refer to the misalignment of ethical intentions into actual behavior alternately as the attitude–behavior, intention–behavior or words–deeds gap (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Elliot & Jankel-Elliot,

2003). The ethical consumerism, psychology, social psychology and consumer behavior domains variously document, but they do not explain the intention–behavior gap (Bagozzi, 2000; Sheeran, Trafimow, & Armitage, 2003; Szmigin et al., 2009). A growing body of research attempts to understand ethical purchase decision-making (e.g., De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Shaw & Shui, 2002; Shaw, Hogg, Wilson, Shui, & Hassan, 2006; Shaw, Shiu, Hassan, Bekin, & Hogg, 2007; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008), but these studies primarily focus on the formation of ethical purchase intentions. The translation from intentions to actual buying behavior remains poorly understood (Auger, Burke, Devinney, & Louviere, 2003; Belk et al., 2005; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Szmigin et al., 2009).

This study sheds light on the intention–behavior (I–B) gap in an ethical consumption (EC) context. The study addresses Fisk's (1998, p.661) reflection that: "a sustainable society is a great idea, but how can the world's 5.7 billion people be redirected to adopt sustainable society practices? No one knows". Marketers express similar frustrations and acknowledge that marketing strategies to reduce the EC I–B gap provide marginal impact at best (Crane & Matten, 2004; Polonsky, 1995). Understanding and bridging the inconsistencies between what ethically-minded consumers intend to purchase and actually consume hold significant benefits for academia, industry, and society at large. To provide insights into the mechanics of why ethically-minded consumers often fail to enact their ethical purchasing/consuming intentions, the study draws upon the methodological framework presented by Edmondson and McManus (2007). The study combines a qualitative research methodology with grounded analysis (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) to explore the EC I–B gap.

[☆] The authors thank Liliana Bove, University of Melbourne, and Graham Sewell, University of Melbourne, for reading and commenting on an early version of this article. The authors also thank Journal of Business Research Associate Editor Drew Martin and the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions.

* Corresponding author at: La Trobe Business School, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 94792178, +61 3 9479 5971.

E-mail address: M.Carrington@latrobe.edu.au (M.J. Carrington).

Table 1
Informant characteristics.

Pseudonym	Generation	Occupation	Partner/family
David	Gen X	(a) Local government-waste collection program	Partner, 2 children
Brigit	Gen X	(a) Local government-sustainability (F/T) (b) Coordinates an environmental awareness group (volunteer)	Partner
Helen	Gen Y	NGO-sustainability (F/T)	Single
Sally	Gen X	Educator (Higher Ed.)-Sustainability (F/T)	Partner, 1 child
Beth	Gen X	Undisclosed	Partner
Rachel	Baby Boomer	(a) Educator (retired) (b) Coordinates a local Transition Towns group (volunteer)	Partner, grown-up children
Claire	Baby Boomer	Consultant (F/T)	Partner, grown-up children
Peter	Gen X	Government-sustainability (F/T)	Single
Camille	Gen X	Research (F/T)	Partner, 1 child
Anita	Gen X	Dietician (P/T)	Single
Meagan	Gen Y	Government-sustainability (F/T)	Partner
Tom	Gen Y	Accountant (F/T)	Partner
Rosa	Gen Y	Government-finance	Single

2. Background

This section has two purposes: (1) to provide a critical examination of the literature on the EC I–B gap; and (2) to establish qualitative research as an appropriate method for understanding this gap.

2.1. Ethical consumer decision making

Ethical consumers 'have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another' (Harrison, Newholm, & Shaw, 2005), and they express concern about their consumption choices' impact. What is ethical, however, encapsulates different expressions, concerns, and issues for each individual. Ethical consumption relates to the ethics of consumption, which concerns the ethics of capitalist market systems and the reduction of consumption overall (Barnett, Cafaro, & Newholm, 2005). Ethical consumption also serves as a medium for ethical/moral action based on subjective moral judgments applied to individual products/brands across the production, consumption and disposition cycle (Brunk, 2010).

Ethical consumerism researchers attempting to understand the purchase decision-making of ethically-minded consumers tend to apply cognitive modeling approaches (Fukukawa, 2003), most commonly the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991; Chatzidakis, Hibbert, & Smith, 2007; De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). These researchers focus on integrating factors into the TPB framework that influence the formation of ethical purchasing intentions, such as internal ethics (Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Shaw & Shui, 2002), information quality and quantity (De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007), and personal values (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). These studies tend to focus on forming stated intentions, and assume that ethical purchase intentions directly determine actual buying behavior (Fukukawa, 2003). This assumption ignores empirical studies in the broader contexts of consumer behavior and social psychology suggesting that purchase intentions do not usually translate into actual buying behavior (Ajzen, Brown, & Carvajal, 2004; Bagozzi, 2000; Morwitz, Johnson, & Schmittlein, 1993; Young, DeSarbo, & Morwitz, 1998).

2.2. The ethical consumption intention–behavior gap

A few researchers move beyond cognitive intention formation to gain insight into the translation between EC intentions and actual behavior. For example, Carrigan and Attalla (2001) reveal that social desirability bias plays a significant role in their respondents' ethical I–B gap. Auger and Devinney (2007) extend this finding by positing that social desirability bias inherent in the self-reported surveys favored by researchers in the ethical consumerism field inflates espoused ethical purchase intentions.

Most recent studies tend to assume some ethical intentions are authentic; however, internal and external factors affect actual purchase decisions. These conceptual and exploratory insights extend the overall understanding of the EC I–B gap, yet the research only provides a partial, emergent understanding of this phenomenon (Szmigin et al., 2009). For example, Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell (2010) conceptually argue that the extent to which consumers translate their ethical intentions into buying behavior depends upon their prior planning (e.g., implementation intentions; see Gollwitzer, 1999), their control over the buying experience (e.g., actual behavioral control; see Ajzen & Madden, 1986), and aspects of the buying environment (e.g., situational context; see Belk, 1975). This conceptual model remains unexplored empirically.

Some exploratory research indicates that the EC I–B gap's perpetuation by consumer's employment of cognitive strategies to minimize remorse and to justify contradicting their ethical intentions (e.g., Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Szmigin et al., 2009). In this vein, Szmigin et al. (2009) find that a lack of cognitive dissonance facilitates the EC I–B gap. The ability of ethical consumers to readily rationalize or neutralize their 'unethical' purchasing behavior partially explains the absence of cognitive dissonance (Szmigin et al., 2009). Chatzidakis et al. (2007) draw upon neutralization theory to propose that the ability to rationalize unethical purchasing behavior as being acceptable, though not ethical, facilitates the observed EC I–B gap.

2.3. Methodological limitations

The ethical consumerism literature favours quantitative methods, in particular self-reported surveys (Auger & Devinney, 2007). The decision-making process and translation between purchase intentions and shopping practices is highly complex and the established survey-based methods for observing ethical consumption fail to capture this complexity (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008; Shaw, Newholm, & Dickinson, 2006; Szmigin et al., 2009). An ethical research context amplifies social desirability bias (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), further limiting the accuracy of the extant survey-based research (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk et al., 2005). In addition, traditional quantitative methods studies on ethical behavior are more suitable to verify theory (Deshpande, 1983). This nascent field of EC I–B research, however, requires a theory construction approach.

In summary, the literature on the EC I–B gap is sparse and provides limited understanding of the gap. Furthermore, previous survey-based methodological approaches fail to grasp ethical consumption's complexity or to develop compelling theory to explain the phenomena. In light of these theoretical and methodological shortcomings, and in line with other recent research on ethical and sustainable consumption, this study uses a qualitative approach (e.g., Belk et al., 2005; Szmigin et al., 2009), which is especially effective for constructing theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Employing

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