

# An Exploratory Study into the Factors Impeding Ethical Consumption

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**ABSTRACT.** Although consumers are increasingly engaged with ethical factors when forming opinions about products and making purchase decisions, recent studies have highlighted significant differences between consumers' intentions to consume ethically, and their actual purchase behaviour. This article contributes to an understanding of this 'Ethical Purchasing Gap' through a review of existing literature, and the inductive analysis of focus group discussions. A model is suggested which includes exogenous variables such as moral maturity and age which have been well covered in the literature, together with further impeding factors identified from the focus group discussions. For some consumers, inertia in purchasing behaviour was such that the decision-making process was devoid of ethical considerations. Several consumers manifested their ethical views through post-purchase dissonance and retrospective feelings of guilt. Others displayed a reluctance to consume ethically due to personal constraints, a perceived negative impact on image or quality, or an outright negation of responsibility. Those who expressed a desire to consume ethically often seemed deterred by cynicism, which caused them to question the impact they, as an individual, could achieve. These findings enhance the understanding of ethical consumption decisions and provide a platform for future research in this area.

**KEY WORDS:** attitude-behaviour gap, ethical consumption, Fair Trade

## Introduction

It is commonly stated that ethical consumption is growing (Berry and McEachern, 2005; Davis, 2006; Nicholls, 2002; Webster, 2000). A longitudinal study by the Co-operative Bank reports that sales of ethical goods rose between 2004 and 2007 at around 12% a year, reaching £35.5 bn in 2007 (Clavin,

2008). Such growth patterns undoubtedly show great potential, but sales in this area still represent less than 6% of the overall consumer market of some £600 bn (Macalister, 2007). A large scale study by Cowe and Williams (2000) found that more than one third of consumers in the UK described themselves as 'ethical purchasers', yet ethically accredited products such as Fair Trade lines only achieved a 1–3% share of their market. Cowe and Williams (2000) named this the '30:3 phenomenon', since approximately 30% of consumers profess to care about ethical standards, but only 3% of purchases reflect these standards. This phenomenon has been independently noted by other authors and has also been termed the 'Ethical Purchasing Gap' (Nicholls and Lee, 2006) and the 'Attitude-Behaviour Gap' (Kim et al., 1997). Research into ethical consumption has increased significantly in recent years, but few studies have explored the factors responsible for this gap. The aim of this study was to explore the factors that impede the translation of consumers' ethical intentions into purchasing behaviour.

## *Ethical consumption*

Many authors comment on the difficulty in defining ethical behaviour (KPMG and Synovate, 2007; Singhapakdi et al., 1999), ethical retailing (Whysall, 1998) and ethical consumption (Cherrier, 2005; Clavin and Lewis, 2005; Howard and Nelson, 2000). Whilst many aspects of consumer behaviour may be questioned ethically, assessments and distinctions tend to be subjective and complicated by circumstances (Cherrier, 2005; Kent, 2005). Ethical considerations may also be contradictory, for example, the desire to 'reduce food miles and support

developing countries' (KPMG and Synovate, 2007, p. 2). Despite this, a number of common ethical issues emerge from the literature, especially Fair Trade principles (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007; Loureiro and Lotade, 2005; Nicholls and Opal, 2005); the use of organically grown and processed materials (Shaw et al., 2006; Tomolillo and Shaw, 2004; Tsakiridou et al., 2008); working practices in developing nations (Annis, 2003; Dickson, 1999; Joergens, 2006); and the depletion of natural resources (Ford et al., 2005; Sanfilippo, 2007). Cooper-Martin and Holbrook (1993, p. 113) define ethical consumer behaviour as 'decision-making, purchases and other consumption experiences that are affected by the consumer's ethical concerns'.

A number of decision-making models have been proposed within the broad area of business ethics (Nicholls and Lee, 2006, p. 371), the majority of which approach the issue from an organisational perspective, often without empirical support (Ford and Richardson, 1994). Comparatively little attention has been given to the role that ethics plays in individual purchasing behaviour (Nicholls and Lee 2006). Among the relatively limited studies on individual ethical decision making, two prominent theoretical approaches are Hunt and Vitell's General theory of Marketing Ethics (Hunt and Vitell, 1986) and various models that draw on the behavioural theories of Ajzen and Fishbein (Chatzidakis et al., 2006).

Hunt and Vitell's General theory of Marketing Ethics (Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Vitell and Muncy, 1992) was developed to explain the ethical behaviour of marketing practitioners, but may also be applied to the study of ethical consumer behaviour (Marks and Mayo, 1991; Vitell et al., 2001). This model is based upon the philosophical principles of *deontology* (obligations or rules) and *teleology* (guided by the consequences of actions). It enjoys wide acceptance and its hypothesised relationships have been tested in numerous empirical studies (Vitell, 2003). According to Hunt and Vitell's model, ethical decision making begins with the perception of an ethical problem and is influenced by a number of exogenous variables. Individuals (e.g. consumers) make deontological and teleological assessments of all possible alternative behaviours to arrive at an overall ethical judgement which guides their inten-

tion and hence their behaviour. The model postulates that in a final stage the consequences of behaviour are absorbed into learning, an aspect that is important in ethical consumption, where enhanced satisfaction might result from purchasing ethically sourced goods, or guilt from buying a less ethical alternative (Chatzidakis et al., 2006).

The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980) identifies two factors: individual attitudes and social norms, as the antecedents of behaviour, while the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) proposes that behaviour depends on three factors: one's attitudes, one's perceptions of societal pressure and the control one feels one has over the purchasing action. However, the relationship between these factors and ethical principles is not clear. For instance, Rest (1986) proposes a version of the planned behaviour model, in which individual consumers pass through four consecutive stages towards an ethical purchase: recognition of the ethical issue; application of ethical judgement; resolution to place ethical concerns ahead of others; and finally action on the ethical issue. However, Jones (1991) suggests that the moral intensity of an issue impacts upon all stages of Rest's model, such that two separate moral issues, simultaneously acknowledged by the consumer, may exert differing levels of influence over the decision process. Hence, a review by Loe et al. (2000, p. 186) concludes that Jones' approach provides 'the most comprehensive synthesis model of ethical decision-making'. However, all of the models discussed above focus on ethical aspects of the decision process and do not readily embrace situations where the ethics of a decision might be secondary to other factors. For instance, ethics might have some influence when buying clothes, but colour, style etc. are likely to be more important. Further, these contributions were intended to model general decision making rather than being specifically concerned with consumption decisions.

Since the mid 1990s, a few researchers have specifically addressed the ethics of consumer behaviour. Strong (1996) suggests a model based on the theory of planned behaviour, in which individuals' beliefs are also considered precursors of attitudes and behavioural intentions. Shaw and her colleagues identify two types of factors affecting consumers'

belief structures: *information* especially that embedded in trustworthy labels, and *normative social factors*, including the influence of peers, family and, in some cases, religion (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). They also include 'ethical obligation' and 'self identity', concepts that first appeared in earlier study by Sparks and others (Sparks and Guthrie, 1998; Sparks et al., 1995). Shaw's group found not only that these two latter constructs influence attitudes, but that the direct contributions of ethical obligation and self-identity may be more significant than the original constructs of attitudes and subjective norm (Shaw and Shiu, 2002; Shaw et al., 2000). They comment: '[this] serves to highlight the deficiency of a model that is underpinned purely by self-interested motives' (p. 114). However, there are some inherent limitations to Shaw's study, most notably in the samples used. In order to collect the views of especially ethically motivated consumers, Shaw sampled subscribers to *The Ethical Consumer* magazine and focused on the purchase of Fair Trade grocery lines. The latter situational factor, together with the 'extreme' (Shaw et al., 2000, p. 884) nature of the sample may have compromised the generalisability of the results.

The approaches discussed so far assume that consumers are actively engaged with at least one ethical issue, to which they give significant consideration, but this is unlikely always to be the case, since consumers may not be fully aware of the ethical issues behind consumption choices. In addition, all of these models (that of Hunt and Vitell (1986) and those based on the study of Ajzen and Fishbein) posit behaviour as a direct consequence of attitudes and intentions, a notion that does not fit with the 'ethical consumption gap' discussed earlier. The research presented here seeks to explore further factors that may intervene between consumers' attitudes and behaviour to inhibit the adoption of 'ethical' products, and thus to enhance the predictive power of existing theories.

#### *Influences on ethical consumption*

The identification of consumers who may be more sympathetic toward ethical issues, and hence more likely to choose ethical products is important in both

practical and theoretical terms. Although a considerable body of research exists in this area, it has so far produced conflicting and confusing findings (Cherrier, 2005), especially in terms of demographic factors. Thus ethical sensitivity is reported to increase with consumers' age (Hines and Ames, 2000), to be greater in female consumers (Parker, 2002), to increase with affluence (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 22) and to be greater at lower educational levels (Dickson, 2005). On the other hand, a similar number of authors find no such correlations, and it is suggested that demographic factors are poor predictors of ethical views, for a variety of background reasons (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005).

According to Kohlberg (1969) individuals pass through six key stages of moral maturity, which inter alia influence consumption behaviour (Rest, 1986). Related to moral maturity are one's beliefs and one's confidence in them, the relevance of which to consumption patterns is argued by McDevitt et al. (2007). These authors suggest that decision-makers with strong beliefs follow their judgement more confidently, especially when required to take individual action. One's confidence and moral maturity in ethical decision making may also be related to one's perceived locus of control (Forte, 2004). Individuals with an *external* locus of control tend to believe that ethical dilemmas are beyond their control whereas those with an *internal* locus of control are more likely to make ethical decisions in defiance of conflicting social or situational pressures (Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1991). These findings show the complexity underlying decision making in ethical consumption, and suggest a number of ways in which moral and emotional factors might interact to influence the outcome of such decision-making processes.

Research into the situational factors that may impede ethical consumption choices is more limited. Factors identified to date include the limited availability of ethical products (Nicholls and Lee, 2006); the excessive bombardment of consumers with messages (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000); inertia in consumption choice (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000); and consumer scepticism of ethical symbols (Nicholls and Lee, 2006). Carrigan and Attalla (2001) suggest that consumers tend to make ethical purchases that do not require them to

pay more, suffer loss of quality or make a special effort.

Whilst guilt is commonly assumed to occur post-purchase (Hiller, 2008), Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) found that anticipated guilt acted as a partial mediator between consumers ethical beliefs and intentions. In focusing on the emotional aspects of decision making they have found that thinking about the negative consequences that could result from a decision may trigger negative anticipated emotions, in turn deterring the consumer from a perceived unethical course of action. Alternatively, making choices that are likely to have more positive implications can arouse positive emotions making such decisions more likely (Steenhaut and Van Kenhove, 2006). This study examined the role of anticipated guilt in ethically questionable consumer situations such as unjustified product returns, but the effects demonstrated could also have bearing on product selection where alternative choices have different ethical stances.

These contributions are summarised in the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1. However, many of the factors listed have been derived either from research within a specific context, or from broad research articles into ethical consumption, none of which specifically focuses upon inhibitors to purchase. Many of the contributions are not grounded in empirical research, and it is possible that factors impeding ethical consumption and leading to the ‘Attitude–Behaviour Gap’ remain unidentified.

### Methodology

Focus group discussion was identified as the most appropriate and accessible technique, given the exploratory nature of the research. This approach has been successfully employed elsewhere to study consumer attitudes in relatively unresearched contexts (Clavin and Lewis, 2005; Nicholls and Lee, 2006). According to Cowe and Williams (2000), a possible reason for the attitude–behaviour gap may be ‘social desirability bias’, also described as ‘over reporting of ethical actions by research respondents seeking to give the “right” answer’ (Clavin and Lewis, 2005, p. 185). In order to minimise this potential effect, focus groups in this study were constructed and moderated along established guidelines (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Three focus groups were conducted according to the recommendation of Krueger and Casey (2009 p. 21), each containing six participants. It was necessary to use this small group size due to the sensitive nature of the subject, and to minimise the potential for social desirability bias (Falconer, 1976). The three focus groups were conducted respectively in Sussex, Hampshire and Dorset, counties of the southern UK, and included participants from 15 to 78 years of age, to ensure representation from each age group. An equal gender mix was also assured, but beyond this, recruitment was based on convenience sampling through existing networks of colleagues and wider family members. Each participant gave informed consent prior to the commencement of the focus group

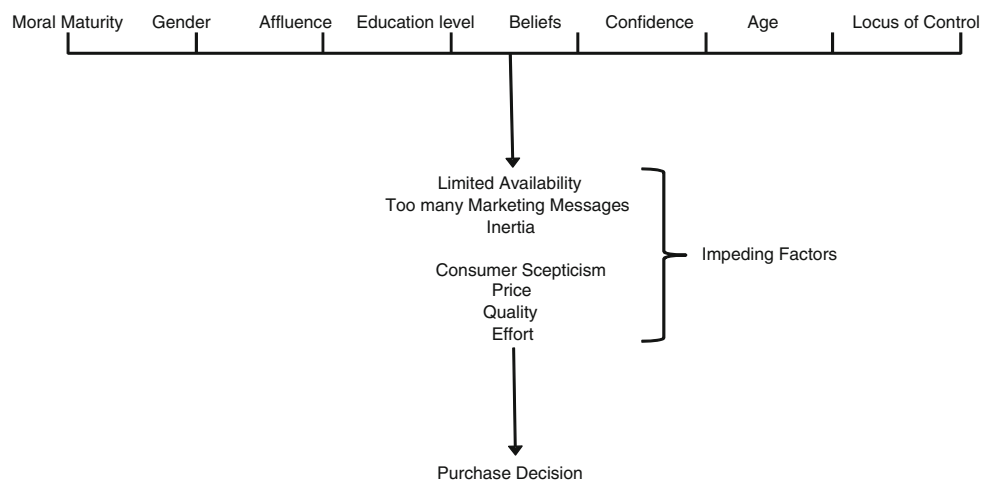


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of factors potentially impeding ethical consumption.

discussions. It was not an aim of this study to identify differences between different consumer groups, and after preliminary analysis of the three focus groups theoretical saturation of the data appeared to have been reached.

In order to ensure that each focus group followed the same structure and that key objectives were addressed, a structured discussion guide was compiled with broad, open-ended discussion prompts as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2009). This guide was piloted by addressing the discussion prompts to three separate respondents in one-to-one interviews, thus ensuring as far as possible that the prompts were easily understood and initiated a free discussion. In keeping with qualitative research principles the moderator did not follow this guide rigidly, and the discussion was allowed to develop freely, so that as far as possible ideas could emerge freely and be adequately probed. Moderation was deliberately relaxed and conversational to produce an unpressured environment and a free flowing discussion. Moderator involvement was kept to a minimum so that the group could discuss issues freely without unnecessary intervention.

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, including notes on tonality, hesitation and intonation. Open and axial coding was used to develop a template of emergent factors, which was refined through iterative coding and recoding to ensure robustness of the findings. This process identified eight key themes that are explored below.

## **Findings**

Key themes emerging from the data were price, which was mentioned the most frequently in the discussion, followed respectively by experience, ethical obligation, information, quality, inertia, cynicism, and guilt. The contributions of each in understanding the Ethical Purchasing Gap are discussed below.

### *Price sensitivity*

Focus group participants often mentioned price, suggesting that they cared more about financial than

ethical values, particularly with reference to food and other frequently purchased items. One participant stated:

I don't... 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 they purchased an ethical alternative, people seemed to experience post-purchase dissonance as soon as they noticed that the price was higher. In some cases, this resulted in the future avoidance of ethical products. For instance, one individual abandoned the purchase of Fair Trade tea and coffee due to the higher price. Participants said that on balance they did care about ethical issues and were willing to pay slightly more; however they were reluctant to pay more than a few pence extra for goods where they saw no significant tangible reward:

A little bit more, yes... 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.

Price appeared less of an issue for locally produced goods. Participants seemed able to justify the premium asked and to understand, in this familiar context, how the extra pence could be justified. Thus, the physical remoteness of other ethical issues may hinder consumers' attachment and commitment to their beliefs as suggested by Whalen et al. (1991). Despite their stated focus on price, some participants appeared more fixed in their habitual purchasing than they were prepared to admit. Faced with a hypothetical situation where price considerations were removed, they did not immediately opt for ethical products as might have been expected.

### *Personal experience*

According to McDevitt et al. (2007), the biggest hurdle to ethical consumption is that individuals may not recognise the ethical consequences of their purchasing choices. Participants in this study seemed most receptive to changes in their habitual purchasing when a particular news story forced them to think about an ethical issue or when they were personally affected, for instance:



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 reacted most strongly to recent negative news stories; positive information generated less interest, was often viewed with cynicism and seemed less likely to affect purchase decisions, as has also been noted by Herr et al. (1991).

When asked outright, participants said they did not consume ethically as an alternative to giving to charity. However, it became apparent in discussion that there were links between charitable donations and ethical consumption. For instance, a number of participants had donated generously to the relief fund for the 2005 Tsunami, only to read reports that the money was not reaching the people for whom it was intended. As a result of this, they switched their ethical purchasing behaviour from Fair Trade goods to local produce, where they felt greater confidence that their money was making a difference.

#### *Ethical obligation*

Participants saw the relevance of personal values to ethical purchasing, and constantly maintained that they would like to make a difference. However, as the discussion continued, contradictions between rhetoric and action kept appearing, where ethical obligation was more concerned with suppressing qualms of conscience. Thus, although they spoke of an obligation to 'do one's bit', especially when the price differential was small, participants gave various reasons why it was 'too difficult' to consume on a purely ethical basis. Individuals' perceptions of what was ethical also varied considerably. When a vegetarian member said it was unacceptable for her to consume a chicken, another participant commented that she

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

This recalls Forte's study on locus of control (Forte, 2004). The vegetarian participant felt her actions could make a difference (internal locus of control), while the second one thought a change in her consumption pattern would have no impact. This exemplifies how an external locus of control

was used to justify existing purchasing behaviour (cf. Singhapakdi and Vitell, 1991).

#### *Lack of information*

Consumers need to be fully informed to make effective purchasing decisions (Sproles et al., 1978). Although the public domain contains much information relevant to ethical consumption (Jones et al., 2007), focus group participants suggested they did not have enough knowledge to make ethical decisions. This contrasts with the study of Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000), where no participant reported a lack of information as being a consideration.

Avoiding unethical products or companies that had received bad press seemed more important, and more achievable to group participants than proactively purchasing ethical products.

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 ethical brands, but also highlights difficulties in measuring the scope of ethical purchasing. It suggests that monitoring sales of products and brands that have been the subject of negative ethical publicity may give an important insight into the effect of ethical beliefs on consumption behaviour. Although participants seemed to acknowledge the problem, its moral significance and its relationship to the lifestyles of citizens of the developed countries, they felt that without prominent communication of these issues, lack of knowledge would continue to limit their ethical consumption.

#### *Quality perception*

Quality perception issues took two clear forms. Some participants perceived products branded 'Fair Trade' as poorer in quality. However, others believed that, for instance, free-range chicken tasted nicer, so that their quest for quality drove them incidentally to ethical consumption.

Some focus group members felt that foods produced in a less ethical way could not be harmful, for instance:

They are not going to be poisonous to you if the government has passed them as safe to eat.

Carrigan and Attalla (2001) note a perceived synonymy between 'ethical' and 'legal' where consumers consider 'acting within the law' to be adequate and also that consumers will not tolerate a loss in quality to purchase ethically. In this research, the perceived quality of ethical goods emerged as a clear influencing factor in the decision-making process.

#### *Inertia in purchasing behaviour*

Although price and quality were prominent, purchasing inertia appeared a stronger barrier to consumption, as it was ultimately this that prevented any change, or even consideration of change, in consumption patterns. This became apparent when participants were asked to disregard price, which had initially been claimed as the key impeding factor in ethical consumption. Group members found themselves admitting that their allegiance to certain brands would always make them less likely to move towards an overtly ethical option. Typical endorsements of brand loyalty were: 'I am a Heinz person'; 'PG tips: everyone has their own tea'; and 'got to have your Weetabix in the morning'. These brand attachments had come to be accepted by group participants, though they were not necessarily considered ethically correct.

#### *Cynicism*

Participants expressed cynicism about retailers' ethical claims to justify their reluctance to purchase on a more ethical basis. There was a feeling that ethical claims were just another marketing ploy, commanding higher prices by taking advantage of consumer goodwill, for instance:

It's purely for company profit. I think it begins and ends there.

There is an inherent moral conflict in the ethical practice of commerce (Nash, 1990) and consumers

may suspect ethical issues raised in marketing unless there seem to be sincere underlying values. Participants in all the focus groups believed that most of the extra premium they paid did not reach the end beneficiary and that much of it was intercepted by corporate or governmental organisations (Shaw and Shiu, 2003). Some claimed that this was a key factor in their decision to disregard ethical products.

A number of participants mentioned a growing advertising trend toward claiming ethical practice for competitive advantage. They were also aware of news stories about instances of malpractice, for example:

These multinationals, you can find a story associated with all of them.

Participants' cynicism seemed related to a lack of information about the benefits of ethical practices combined with an excess of information about unethical practices. This led to confusion and a perceived vulnerability.

#### *Guilt*

Hall (2007) suggests that consumers have evolved past a sense of guilt towards identification and solidarity with exploited groups, but the focus group discussions showed a different situation. Although guilt was a reoccurring theme throughout the research, it was not an early part of the decision-making process as Steenhaut and Van Kenhove (2006) have suggested, tending rather to manifest itself as a retrospective feeling following a choice not to purchase an ethical alternative. Participants also tended to suppress their feelings of guilt, for instance, by expressing doubt whether their purchase would have actually made a difference (cf. Chatzidakis et al., 2007).

## **Discussion**

Figure 2 summarises the factors identified in this study as impeding the consumption of ethical goods. The range of potential exogenous factors is not conclusive, but factors discussed in previous publications are acknowledged here to account for the

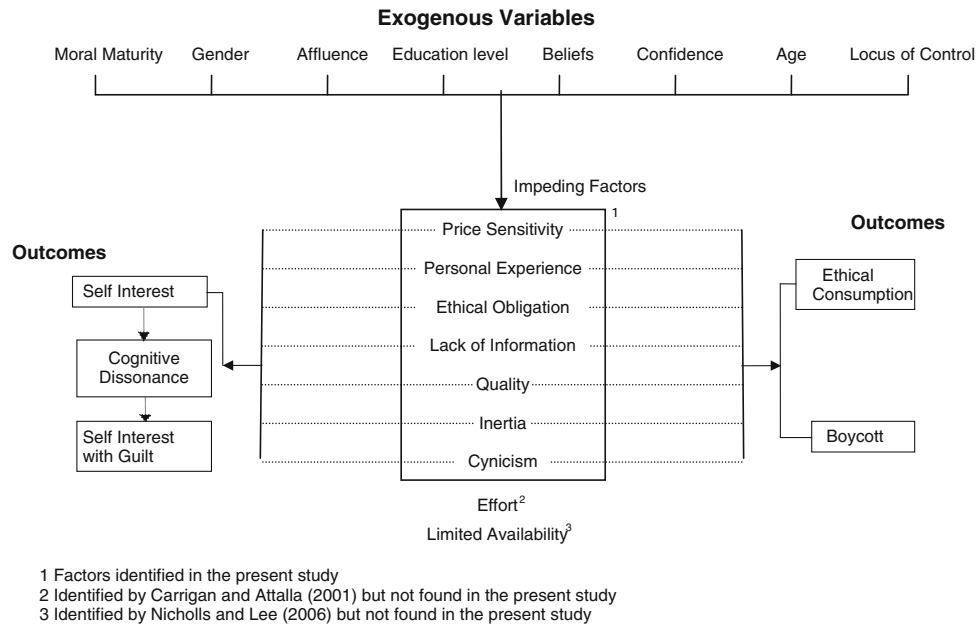


Figure 2. Model of factors impeding ethical consumption.

diversity of response between different consumers. It was not within the scope of this research to confirm the predictive value of these factors. The model shows possible consequent outcomes of the purchase decision, with those representing a form of ‘ethical consumption’ on the right-hand side and those reflecting self interest on the left. While it is acknowledged that there is a likely continuum between purchase decisions dominated by concern for ethical aspects, and self-interest devoid of such considerations, the range of possible outcomes are depicted in this way for clarity. Many participants have described purchase situations as being influenced by ethical considerations (depicted here as ‘ethical consumption’), or a scenario where a particular product or brand is avoided due to perceived or reported poor ethical standards (depicted here as ‘boycott’). Guilt was identified in this research as caused by post-purchase cognitive dissonance, and so it has been allied to self-interested purchase, but these links are represented by dashed lines to acknowledge that such dissonance does not occur for all consumers or in all situations, and may not always lead to the feelings of guilt described by participants in this study.

This research provides the first focused examination of the factors impeding ethical consumption,

but the findings do correspond in most cases to influences identified in previous broader studies. Concerns about the price and quality of goods, highlighted by Carrigan and Attalla (2001), were found to be important, and price was the barrier to ethical consumption most discussed in the focus groups. Nicholls and Lee (2006) suggest that consumers’ scepticism of ethical claims is influential, and participants in this study described similar feelings, summarised here as cynicism. However, Nicholls and Lee also highlighted the limited availability of ethical alternatives, a factor that was not identified as a problem in this study. Again, in contrast to Carrigan and Attalla’s (2001) findings, participants in this study did not see additional effort required to buy ethical lines as a barrier. Ethical products are becoming more widely available, and many items have only recently appeared in mainstream retail outlets. This may help to explain why concerns about availability (and hence purchasing effort) may no longer be so relevant for many products.

In extended discussion during the focus groups, participants complained about not having enough information to select products according to their ethical principles. It became clear that there is a need for more information in point of sale merchandising. This finding contrasts with that of Boulstridge and



Carrigan (2000) who comment on the number and density of messages with which consumers are bombarded. Thus, increasing awareness and interest in such issues over the last decade may have increased consumers' appetites to be informed.

An important aspect of ethical consumption seemed to be post-purchase dissonance in the form of guilt at not opting for the ethical alternative. For respondents in this study, price appeared to be a key barrier to consuming ethically. Consumers believed that the benefactor from their ethical choices should be the underpaid producer or labourer, but cynically supposed that many corporate organisations profit from such products. The quality of ethical goods was questioned, with the exception of local food produce, and most Fair Trade products were thought to be of inferior quality. The common perception was that if a company is primarily focused on maintaining ethical standards, then the quality of its products is likely to be lower. Consumers also showed great brand loyalty and image consciousness, such that when other tangible factors such as price were ignored, brand loyalty and purchasing inertia still often prevented them from buying an ethical alternative.

The limited scope of this study makes it impossible to claim that this depiction is comprehensive, but it does provide insight into the key impeding factors that may explain the ethical consumption gap outlined in the literature. While a multiplicity of consumption choices might be made, previous studies have highlighted the growing incidence of 'ethical consumption' with consumers selecting products marketed as 'Fair-Trade' or Organic (Clavin, 2008; Davis, 2006; Nicholls, 2002). Similarly, other studies have highlighted the importance of boycotts that companies have suffered as a consequence of stories emerging questioning ethical aspects within their supply chain (Clouder and Harrison, 2005). Both of these possible outcomes have found some support in this study with participants seeking ethical alternatives in some cases, and avoiding particular products and brands in others where they have reason to question the companies' ethical credibility. It is acknowledged, however, that the majority of purchase decisions are not subjected to such scrutiny, decisions being mostly based on self-interest. Where this is the case, many participants in this study described post-purchase feelings

of guilt if they were aware that they had not made the ethically optimal choice.

## Conclusions

Leading theories of ethical decision making use behavioural intention as a direct antecedent to behaviour, an assumption which clashes with an attitude-behaviour gap that is well documented in the ethical consumerism literature. This study identifies a range of factors that intervene between consumers' attitudes, behavioural intentions and actual behaviour. The seven key factors that emerged from analysis of the qualitative data provide greater understanding of why ethical attitudes might not result in ethical purchase decisions. While doing so, they provide a useful step forward in understanding ethical consumption. These findings do not aim to challenge existing theories of decision making, but suggest an additional stage between ethical intention and behaviour, increasing the predictive power of existing attitude-behaviour models.

However, it is clear that this study represents only a starting point for research in this area. Each individual factor identified here warrants further individual examination, and other studies may also uncover further factors that will improve our understanding of the ethical purchase gap.

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