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Sacha Joseph-Mathews
University of the Pacific

Nicole Bieak-Kreidler
La Roche College

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Attitude versus Involvement: Predicting Ethically and Socially Responsible Consumption Behavior'

Sacha Joseph-Mathews

Associate Professor,
Eberhardt School of Business,
University of the Pacific,
Stockton, California, USA.

Nicole Bieak-Kreidler

Associate Professor and Chair,
School of Professions, Interior Design,
La Roche College,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.

ABSTRACT

Critics argue that the value gap (difference between what consumers say they care about and what they actually choose to purchase) suggests that ethical consumption is not as important as consumers imply. There is much talk about the ethical consumer “myth’ as consumers often claim to be interested in purchasing ethically and socially responsible products yet sales figures for green products often do not exceed 5% total product sales in any one category with organic fruits and vegetables being the one exception. Traditional models use consumer attitudes to the environment as a predictor of ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior (ESRCB) but this yields mixed results in the literature; whereas this study suggests that sustainable lifestyle involvement (SLI) is a much stronger predictor of ESRCB. Findings confirm that the stronger the level of involvement with a sustainable lifestyle the greater the likelihood of exhibiting ESRCB.

Keywords: Ethical Consumption Ethically and Socially Responsible Consumption, Sustainable Lifestyle Involvement, Environmental Attitude, Green Consumerism, Green Products

INTRODUCTION

Green consumerism, ethical consumption, ethically responsible buying behavior, environmentally significant consumer behavior and sustainable consumption are areas that have become increasingly more important in today’s marketplace. Today consumers and companies alike seek out opportunities to purchase or provide products that both meet a need and have a positive impact on our environment. Critics argue that the value gap suggests that ethical consumption is not as important as consumers imply. There is much talk about the ethical

consumer ‘myth’, yet buying ethically and socially responsible products (ESRP) is becoming more prevalent in the marketplace. The goals of this study are three fold. First this study seeks to examine the extent to which the value gap influences ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior (ESRCB). Second, the major influences on ESRCB are investigated. Finally, the role of active sustainable lifestyle involvement (SLI) choices on consumer behavior as it relates to ESRB is explored.

Background

Ethical consumption has been defined by Doane (2001) as the freely chosen purchase of a product that is directly related to a specific ethical issue (for e.g. labor conditions animal rights, human rights, the environment etc.). Consumers have the ability to vote with their pocket book and thereby translate their ethical concerns into purchase behavior that supports products with positive attributes (e.g. environmentally-friendly products) and or boycotts products with negative attributes (e.g. products made by children or produced in sweat shops), (De Pelsmacker et. al 2005). Over the last two decades, this type of consumer behavior has been on the rise, as consumption of goods that are ethically and socially responsible has steadily increased (The Co-operative Bank 2009). Each year, a new set of studies report that consumers are more concerned than ever about the impact the items they buy has on the planet and the people who occupy it (Ethical Consumerism Report 2010; USDA 2011).

A study by Hines and Ames (2000) indicated that 68% of participants claimed to purchase a product/service primarily because of a company’s socially responsible reputation. Similarly, according to MORI (2000), on average 46% of European consumers claim to be willing to pay substantially more for ethical products. A 2009 survey by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (of 9,000 consumers across nine countries) concluded that green and ethical issues significantly influence where consumers shop and what they buy. Likewise, a 2010 ImagePower Green Brands Survey (of 9,000 people in eight countries) indicated that 60% of consumers prefer to purchase from environmentally responsible companies. These studies suggest that despite worldwide economic uncertainty, consumers have not yet abandoned ethically responsible buying behavior (Manget *et al.*, 2009). More than ever, the notion of being ethically and socially responsible is playing a greater role in the consumer decision making process (Organic Trade Association 2011).

Attitudes Key to ESR equation

In examining the nomological network of ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior, we look to consumer attitudes as a key predictor in the model. However, in the existing body of literature, the tested relationship between consumer attitudes and buyer behavior has yielded mixed results. On the one hand, several studies suggest that attitudes on their own tend to be somewhat poor predictors of buyer behavior (Cobb-Walgren and Ruble 1995), this is particularly the case in cause-related marketing (Mainieri et al., 1997; Shaw and Clarke 1999; Tanner and Kast 2003; Webster, 1975; Wicker, 1969). However, on the other hand, a growing body of research contends that consumer perceptions and attitudes combined with specific values do in fact influence ethical consumption behavior (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Hunt and Vitell 1993; Shaw and Clarke 1999; Vitell, Singhapakdi, and Thomas 2001). For example, extant literature suggests that specific consumer attitudes such as internal locus of control (Schwepker and Cornwell 1991), self efficacy (Ellen et al. 1991), altruism (Schwartz 1970; Stern et al. 1993), conservation (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Henton and Wilson 1976) dogmatism (Anderson

and Cunningham 1972; Kinnear et al. 1974) liberalism (Roberts 1996) and personal values (Dickson 2000; 2001; Fritzsche 1995) were directly related to green consumerism or ESRCB. Researchers believe that the greater the environmental consciousness and knowledge base; the more likely a consumer is to make an ethical purchase (Harrison et al. 2005). Essentially these consumers expressed their values and beliefs in their purchase behavior (Hoyer and MacInnis 2004; Stern 2000). These attitudes and responses to environmental appeals are a function of their belief that individuals can positively influence the outcome of such problems (e.g. Antil 1984; Kinnear et al. 1974; Roberts 1995; 1996b; Van Liere and Dunlap 1981).

Adoption of Ethically and Socially Responsible Products

Given that more and more consumers are open to ethically and socially responsible consumption, and because we know that there is a positive correlation between attitudes to the environment and ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior, the question remains; is there a stronger or better predictor of ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior that forgoes the gap. One theory typically used to examine product adoption is the Rogers (1962) Diffusion of Innovation (DOI). The adoption of ESRPs by consumers can also be examined using this model. Roger's (1962) model has five main stages; knowledge, persuasion, decision to adopt or reject, followed by implementation and confirmation. Past studies tell us that consumers who engage in ESRCB seem to have specific knowledge and appear to be positively persuaded to purchase ESRPs. The challenge seems to materialize in the 'decision to adopt' phase of the model. This is also referred to as the value gap, where there isn't evidence in sales to support the commitment consumers say they have toward buying ESRPs (Devinney 2010; Moraes et. al. 2012). For example, statistics from the Organic Trade Association state that 78% of consumers say they are buying organic food, four in ten consumers say they are buying more organic products now than ever before and 72% of parents say they are familiar with the USDA organic seal. Yet, total organic sales in 2009 were less than 4% of total US food sales and fair trade and organic coffee hovers at about 3 % of the total market with the US consuming more organic coffee than anywhere else in the world. Organic fruits and vegetables, which are the highest seller of all organic goods, represent only 11.4 percent of all U.S. fruit and vegetable sales (Organic Trade Association 2011).

For some researchers there is no single definitive model which adequately explains the gap between positive environmental consciousness and ESRCB (Pickett-Baker and Ozaki 2008). Some social scientists blame it on interviewer bias; suggesting that in attitude related research, respondents will give socially desirable and sometimes misleading answers (De Pelsmacker et. al 2005; Ulrich and Sarasin 1995). Another explanation may pertain to measurement issues, as attitudes are often subjective evaluations and in many instances participants are not always able and or willing to report their attitudes and convictions accurately, especially in the case of socially sensitive issues such as ethical consumption behavior (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Maison 2002). Some researchers call instead for measures relevant to the actual purchase behavior being examined (De Pelsmacker et. al 2005).

Whatever the rationale, the reality is that the sales are not there to support what consumers say they are doing. This study suggests that instead of testing attitudes, we should use a measure that is perhaps more relevant to ethical consumption and a logical option is sustainable lifestyle involvement. The argument is that people who embrace a sustainable lifestyle on their own

would naturally engage in ESRC as part of that lifestyle. We believe that sustainable lifestyle involvement should be a better predictor of ESRCB and as such; play a stronger role in explaining the value gap between attitudes towards the environment and ESRCB.

Role of Involvement in ESR equation

Mittal (1989) considers involvement to be a motivational state, while Rothschild (1984) refers to it as “an unobservable state of interest, motivation or arousal” (p.216). According to Zaichkowsky (1985), involvement with a product is “a person’s perceived relevance of the object based on inherent needs, values and interests” (p. 342). Personal involvement typically spans three general areas; persistence, intensity and involvement objects. Rothschild (1984) considers intensity from a perspective of either high or low, whereas persistence is identified as either enduring or situational. Involvement with objects or product involvement looks at the general and permanent concern with an object. Two other dimensions of involvement that have also been expressed in the literature are enduring involvement and situational involvement (Houston and Rothschild 1978). Enduring involvement refers to the ongoing and long lasting concern that can influence a consumer’s information processing, while purchase/situational involvement looks at involvement with a specific situation (Laurent and Kapferer 1985).

Numerous studies have demonstrated that the more involved a consumer is with a product and or situation, the more likely that consumer is to perceive a higher level of personal relevance with said product or situation and several studies have linked involvement to specific types of consumer behavior (Bloch 1982; Celsi and Olson 1988; Zaichkowsky 1985). For example, personal involvement has been linked to brand attitude (Park and Young 1986), intention to purchase (Oliver and Bearden 1983), satisfaction (Oliver and Bearden 1983; Shaffer and Sherrell 1997) and decision making (Clarke and Belk 1978). In the ESR literature, researchers began to look at involvement as a way to close the gap between intent and behavior (Bezencon and Blili 2010). For the purpose of this study, we define sustainable lifestyle involvement (SLI) as an individual’s level of interest with and perceived relevance of a sustainable lifestyle. For example, as it applies to ESR, consumers may decide to purchase fair-trade coffee because they admire the concept of fair trade and have chosen to incorporate this philosophy of fair trade into their own lifestyle, and support companies who do same. We are suggesting that in addition to attitudes to environmental consciousness, involvement in a sustainable lifestyle is a key component in determining ESRCB.

Research Methods

Each construct was operationalized using established scales derived from the literature and adapted in some instances for the purpose of this study. Two scales were specifically developed for the study; sustainable lifestyle involvement and ethically responsible consumption behavior. Each measure demonstrated a construct reliability of .7 or higher. Procedures outlined by Churchill (1979) were followed to produce and refine these two measures. Participants responded to items that assessed high attitudes (alpha =.906) and low attitudes (alpha =.872) to the environment, sustainable lifestyle involvement (SLI, alpha =.893), ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior (ESRCB, alpha =.906) and ethically and socially responsible product repurchase intentions (alpha =.822).

Respondents were recruited by students in a mid-sized metropolitan area in the Western United States. A total of 303 usable survey respondents were obtained following the data screening

process. In the sample 38% of the respondents were male, 62% were female, 58% were Caucasian, 4% African American, 11% were Latino, 19% Asian, 1% were Native American and 7% identified themselves as other. In terms of education attainment levels 54% of the sample had at least a four year degree, over 20% had some graduate education and less than 3% did not have a high school diploma. Overall, 68% of the sample had an annual income of over \$60,000 a year. Four hypotheses were proposed and regression analysis was used to regress ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior (ESRCB) on three (3) independent variables: High Attitudes to the Environment, Low Attitudes to the Environment and Sustainable Lifestyle Involvement.

Hypothesis 1: Low Attitudes to the Environment will be negatively related to ESRCB.

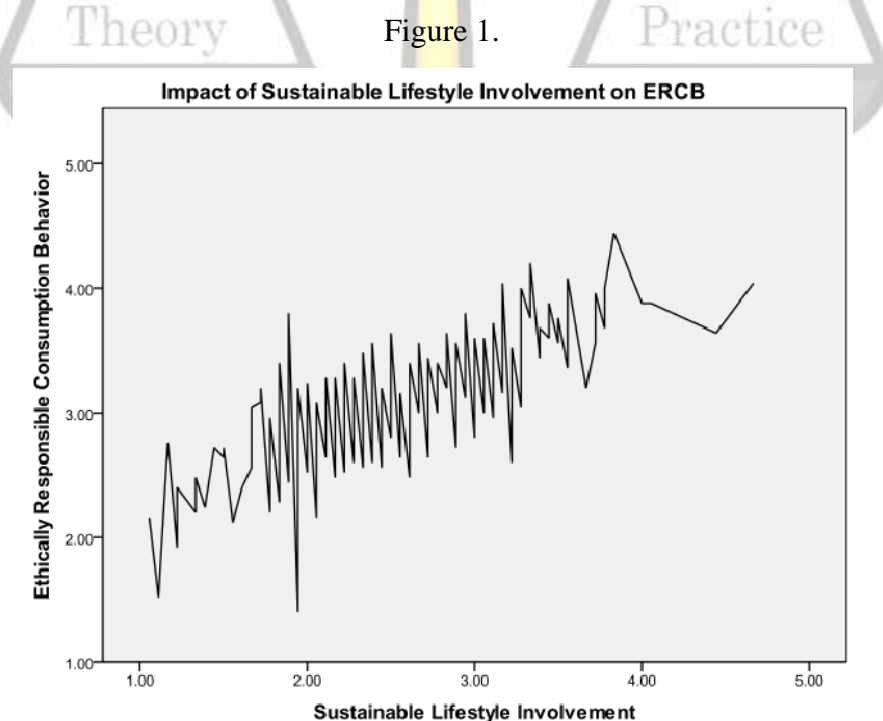
Hypothesis 2: High Attitudes to the Environment will be positively related to ESRCB.

Hypothesis 3: Sustainable Lifestyle Involvement will be positively related to ESRCB.

Hypothesis 4: There is a difference between the ESRCB scores of low and high SL involvement consumers.

Results

Hypothesis 1: Adjusted $R^2=.03$, $p= <.005$ $B = -.077$ (*Supported*). **Hypothesis 2:** Adjusted $R^2 =.089$, $p= <.005$ $B = .004$ (*Supported*). **Hypothesis 3:** Adjusted $R^2=.573$, Significance= $<.001$ $B = .559$ (*Supported*). **Hypothesis 4:** There is a significant difference between the ESR scores of low and high SL involvement consumers. This hypothesis was tested with an independent T-test, where SL involvement was divided into < 3.5 and ≥ 3.5 . The results rejected the hypothesis that ESR mean scores for high and low SL involvement are the same. The mean for low SL Involvement was 3.0, and the mean for high SL Involvement was 3.9 $t(234)= 11.427$ $p=<.001$ (*Supported*). Figure 1. demonstrates the relationship between ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior and sustainable lifestyle involvement.



Discussion

Hypotheses 1 and 2 support extant literature where persons who profess to have a positive attitude to the environment also tend to purchase ethically responsible products and vice-versa people who do not have a positive tend to not purchase ethically responsible products (De Pelsmacker et. al 2005; Harrison et al. 2005; Hoyer and MacInnis 2004; Stern 2000). While these finding add to the various studies that confirm the positive relationship between positive attitudes and positive ESRCB, this study does go a step further. There is a scarcity of research looking at the relationship between poor attitudes to the environment and a lack of ESRCB. This study examines the relationship between both positive and negative attitudes to the environment and ethically and socially responsible consumption behavior. Instead of finding an insignificant relationship between negative attitudes to the environment and ESRCB, a strong, statistically significant, negative relationship was discovered. Low involvement was negatively related to ESRB ($B = -.073$, $p = <.005$, $t = -3.019$) and high involvement was positively related to ESRB ($B = .659$, $p = <.001$, $t = 27.558$). This suggests that both anti and pro-environment sentiment are important in the consumption equation for green and ethical products.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 offer fodder for discussion but, hypothesis 3 is the main contribution to the literature from this study. Hypothesis 3 suggests that consumers who are actively involved in a sustainable lifestyle often will purchase ESR products. It does appear that living a sustainable lifestyle is a significantly stronger predictor of purchase behavior over simply professing to support the environment. The adjusted R^2 of the model moved from .077 to .089 when the high attitudes variable was added to the regression model of ethically responsible consumption behavior. However after involvement was added to the model, the adjusted R^2 then moved from .089 to .55; thereby indicating that attitudes (both positive and negative) pale as predictors of ESRCB when compared with SLI.

Managerial Implications and Future Research

Many of the advertising and product promotions aimed at encouraging ethically and socially responsible consumption often focuses on how the specific product helps to protect the environment or limits the harm to the environment. The thinking here is that there is a direct positive relationship between environmental consciousness and ethically responsible consumption behavior. In a 1992 Advertising Age poll, 70% of consumers said their purchases were somewhat influenced by environmental messages in advertising and product labeling. However, in the same study more than half of the respondents reported that they rarely believed the environmental claims about products made by marketers and companies (Chase and Smith 1992). Since then this duplicity and ambivalence in consumers has not improved much. In the US in particular there seems to be heavy distrust about environmental claims in advertising and on product labels (Dagnoli 1991; Schwartz and Miller 1991).

The study findings here suggest that perhaps marketers may be better off demonstrating how a particular product ties into a sustainable lifestyle. A consumer who has a lifestyle where he/she chooses to drive an ethically responsible car, recycle, exercise and eat right, would strive to ensure all of their purchases support the lifestyle they have already adopted. Marketers can take one of two approaches. One option is to aggressively market based on psychographic and behavioral segmentation methods and target marketing directly to consumers who are already exhibiting characteristics of a sustainable lifestyle. An alternative approach is to demonstrate how green products are part of a larger corporate strategy designed to embrace sustainability in their business model and throughout their entire supply-chain. This approach encourages

consumers to support companies who have the same commitment in business that these consumers have in their own lifestyle. Perhaps more importantly, this methodology actively embraces the reality that consumers simply do not believe green manufacturer claims on product labeling. Yet another option in marketing ESR products may be to focus on the reasons why people don't buy ESR and directly contradict those ideas and criticisms to convert skeptics. The findings from this study suggest that being against a sustainable lifestyle is also a predictor of not buying. Perhaps marketers are better off focusing on the reasons why people don't buy ethically responsible products than trying to highlight the reasons for buying ethically responsible products.

Ultimately, researchers need to further examine the role of SLI on ESRCB. Future research should also explore additional independent variables in the ESRCB model and especially in the context of US consumers, as a significant portion of ESRCB research is based on respondents from Europe. If retailers of natural, organic, sustainable and ethical foods intend to significantly grow their respective markets they will need to significantly increase their current knowledge base as it pertains to the best predictors of ESRCB. This study is an initial step in that direction.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sacha Joseph-Mathews is an Associate Professor of Marketing in the Eberhardt School of Business at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California. Professor Joseph-Mathews has

a PhD in marketing and a Master of Science degree in Tourism and Hospitality Management from Florida State University. She also holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communications from the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. She has taught classes in marketing, international business, tourism, event planning, advertising and diversity. Outside of academia she has worked and consulted in marketing, international business, tourism and with several non-profit organizations. Her research focuses on international business, tourism, ethnic marketing, green consumerism and ethical consumption, with social entrepreneurship as a recent addition.

Nicole Bieak-Kreidler is an Associate Professor and Chair of the School of Professions, Interior Design, at La Roche College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Professor Bieak-Kreidler received her Bachelor of Science in Interior Design from Philadelphia University, her Master's of Science degree in Textile Engineering from Philadelphia University and her PhD in Integrated Textile Science from Auburn University. She has published articles in marketing, tourism and hospitality, interior design, textile science and engineering, and sustainability. Her research focuses on sustainability in design, hospitality and tourism management, textile engineering and ethical consumption. Nicole Bieak-Kreidler has taught classes in consumer behavior, sustainability, interior design, textile science and engineering.

