The Gap between Attitudes and Behaviour in Ethical Consumerism: Empirical Evidence from China

1. Introduction

A growing number of ethical consumers have started to use their own private consumption behaviour to influence social issues (Muncy and Vitell, 1992). Although a large scale study by Cowe and Williams (2000) suggested that more than one third of consumers in UK described themselves as ‘ethical purchasers’, ethically accredited products such as Fair Trade lines achieved a very limited market share (only 1-3%). It appears that a significant ‘attitude–behaviour gap’ may exist in consumer ethical consumption decision-making (Deng, 2011; Kim, Forney and Arnold, 1997). Despite research into ethical consumption increasing significantly in recent years, few studies have explored this attitude-behaviour gap in ethical consumerism (Bray et al. 2010). Furthermore, the existing studies are mainly conducted in the West (Tian et al., 2011), with little attention given to emerging countries such as China. As China has become the world’s biggest market (Tian et al., 2011), research into ethical consumerism in China is important for both the academics and practitioners. Therefore, the purpose of this project is to develop and test a conceptual model of ethical consumerism in China, in order to gain deeper knowledge of Chinese consumers’ attitudes and behaviours towards business ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

This research proposal is divided into four sections. The next section reviews the relevant literature. Following that, the proposed research methodology is discussed. The final part is the expected original contributions of this research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

Ethical consumerism refers to consumer choices based on the social, non-traditional components of products (Auger et al., 2003) as well as personal and moral beliefs (Carrigan et al., 2004). Research into ethical consumerism has been focused on modelling ethical consumer behaviour based on existing attitude-behaviour models (Chatzidakis et al., 2007). One of the most frequently used models is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991), which is a theory of attitude-behaviour relationships that seeks to provide an explanation of behaviour, and links attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, behavioural intentions and behaviour in a fixed causal sequence (Harrison et al., 2005). Eagly and Chaiken (1993) argued that a measure of personal moral or ethical obligation should be added to the traditional theory of planned behaviour structure. Research by Sparks and Shepherd (1992) also suggested that the TPB should be modified to incorporate a measure of self-identity. In this proposed research, modified TPB will be adopted.

Most studies hold the viewpoint that ethical, socially responsible companies will be bound to attract consumers to buy their products and services, while a company’s unethical behaviour may result in consumer boycott (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). However, the value generated by a company conducting marketing strategies in a “socially responsible manner” is controversial (Smith et al., 1996). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be conceptualised economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 1979). According to Carroll, ethical responsibilities embody those standards, norms, or expectations that reflect a concern for stakeholders like the environmental, civil rights, and many other forms. Philanthropic responsibilities encompass those corporate actions that are in response to society’s expectation including business contributions to the arts, education, or the community (Carroll, 1991). The most existing studies focus on higher level CSR activities (ethical and philanthropic responsibilities) which are also the primary concerns in this research. The effect of CSR on consumers’ ethical attitudes will be explored, which will also examine some barriers which impede consumers’ ethical purchase behaviour.
Ethical consumer behaviour is more complex and heterogeneous than may at first be apparent (Low and Davenport, 2007). Consumers’ motivations vary, and their behaviours are dependent on different circumstances (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). Freestone and McGoldrick (2008) suggested that the complexity of ethical consumer choices reflects the complicated process of ethical decision making, which requires detailed evaluations of personal and social benefits and harms derived from products with ethical attributes.

To sum up, based on TPB, a conceptual model linking corporate social responsibilities to ethical consumption attitude, intention and purchase is presented in Figure 1 for empirical examination and to explain Chinese consumers’ ethical purchase behaviour. Specific hypotheses are developed in the following section.

2.2 Hypotheses Development

2.2.1 CSR Activities and Information

Prior research shows the mixed results of CSR’s impact on consumer attitude. CSR activities can lead to consumers having positive attitudes towards a particular enterprise and its products (Berger et al., 1996). Consumers, in assessing their buying choice, would inspect the company’s background, attitude, and behaviour beyond quality of the product itself (Manakkalathil et al., 1995). Carvalho, Sen and Lima (2010) suggested that consumers are often willing to pay higher prices for products from companies they perceive to be ethical and socially responsible. However, Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) determined, when an enterprise discloses positive social responsibility information, consumers tend to give a lower evaluation on product quality. They are sceptical of whether enterprises really do exercise social responsibility behaviour (Deng, 2012). Beckmann (2007) subscribed to the view that consumers are interested in CSR, but at the same time rather sceptical and cynical in their views. Furthermore, the result from some research suggests that information on ethical and unethical behaviour has asymmetric effects on consumers’ attitudes (Folkes et al., 1999). Consumers tend to believe more easily that companies are unethical rather than ethical. Other researchers have taken more neutral position by stating that awareness about companies’ unethical behaviour might not lead to boycotting them; rather their products are expected to be cheaper (Creyer, 1997). Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed to be tested:

\[ H1: \text{CSR activities have a positive effect on consumer attitudes toward ethical purchases} \]
\[ H2: \text{Positive CSR information has a positive effect on consumer attitudes toward ethical purchases} \]
2.2.2 Consumer Ethical Obligation and Self-identity

Ethical consumers may hold strong feelings of obligation for others that impact their purchase choices (Shaw et al., 1999). According to Ajzen (1991), perceived moral obligation is independent of effects for attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behaviour control. Such a measure of the obligation represents an individual’s internalised ethical rules, which reflect their personal beliefs about right and wrong (Harrison et al., 2005). In many instances the addition of a measure of the obligation has been found to improve the explanation of intention (Raats et al., 1995). Shepherd and Frewer (1995) used the TPB as a framework to explore attitudes towards the use of gene technology in food production and found that the ethical obligation has a significant independent predictive effect. A hypothesis is proposed below:

\[ H3: \text{Consumer ethical obligation has a positive effect on ethical purchase intention} \]

Within both the sociological and the psychological literature, a person’s self-identity (or self-concept) has been viewed as an important influence on behaviour (Turner, 1982). Identity theory is concerned with the wider social context of behaviour, which links behaviour to identifiable social characteristics (Charng, Piliavin and Callero (1988). The TPB is considered more psychological in that it is less concerned with the wider social implications of behaviour, focusing more on normative aspects (Shaw, 2000). Consumers make ethical consumption choices because ethical issues have become an important part of their self-identity and as such self-identity is found to be significant in the explanation of intention to purchase (Shaw et al., 2000). In the area of green consumerism, Sparks and Shepherd (1992) found that self-identity contributes to the explanation of intention over and above the contribution made by the other theory of planned behaviour measures. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H4: \text{Consumer self-identity is positively related to ethical purchase intention} \]

Following TPB, attitudes towards ethical purchase are hypothesized to influence ethical purchase behaviour via the mediating variable of ethical purchase intention. Empirical studies have demonstrated a significant positive relationship between ecological intention and behaviour (cf. Li, 1997). Chan’s (2001) findings also supported the classic behavioural proposition that intention is the most immediately relevant predictor of corresponding behaviour. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed

\[ H5: \text{Consumer attitudes towards ethical purchases are positively related to ethical purchase intention} \]
\[ H6: \text{Ethical purchase intention is positively related to ethical purchase behaviour} \]

2.2.3 Barriers to Ethical Consumption

Consumers might compromise on ethics when a decision involves a trade-off between ethics and traditional purchasing criteria (price, quality and availability) (Bray et al., 2011). The evidence on the importance of product quality as a trade-off attribute is clear, which is that consumers do not accept ethical company behaviour as a substitute for product quality (Sen et al., 2001; Folkes et al., 1999). Thus, this proposed research will not discuss product quality as a limitation to ethical consumerism. However, the evidence on the importance of price in ethical consumer decisions is inconclusive (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). Mohr and Webb (2005) claimed that information on CSR can influence purchase intentions more strongly than price. Bray, Johns and Kilburn (2011) found that financial considerations take precedence over perceived ethical values, particularly with reference to food and other frequently purchased items. Papaoikonomou’s (2011) survey also confirmed that some of the
ethical products and services are too expensive which inhibit purchase. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H7a: \text{High prices have a negative moderating effect on the relationship between consumers’ ethical intention and ethical purchase behaviour}. \]

Regarding the availability factor, the lack of offers becomes an inhibiting factor that does not allow ethical consumers to buy according to their standards (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). Creyer and Ross (1997) found that consumers claim that they would change their retail store if there were no ethical alternatives. In other words, a lack of availability of ethical product has no effects on consumers’ ethical intention and purchase behaviour. However, other research has raised availability of products as an impeding factor for ethical consumerism (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H7b: \text{Lack of availability of ethical product has a negative moderating effect on the relationship between consumers’ ethical intention and ethical purchase behaviour}. \]

The purchase of many everyday products has a habitual character (Biel et al. 2005). When behaviours are habitual, people fall back on routinized decision-making with little conscious awareness (Biel et al., 2005). When habits are strong, the relationship between behaviours and lately formed attitudes is weak. Thus, people may have established habits that are not easily conquered even if they have formed positive attitude toward ethical purchase (Biel et al., 2005). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H8a: \text{Unethical purchasing habit has a negative moderation effect on the relationship between consumers’ ethical intention and ethical purchase behaviour}. \]

Becoming an ethical consumer can be a slow process that takes time (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011). Freestone and McGoldrick (2008) found that ethical consumers usually undergo a slow change process. They claimed that individuals are gradually developing a more socially conscientious mindset. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

\[ H8b: \text{Time lag in adopting ethical buying habit has a negative moderation effect on the relationship between consumers’ ethical intention and ethical purchase behaviour}. \]

3. **Proposed Methodology**

The main research method for this project will be a quantitative method supplemented with initial qualitative methods. The quantitative approach is traditionally associated with logical positivism and is usually deductive (Gill et al., 2002). Quantitative studies, therefore, seek to establish causal relationships among objectively specified variables, testing hypotheses derived from predictive theories (Kerlinger, 1986). Using this approach, variables are precisely measured and data is collected under standardised conditions using an instrument such as a questionnaire (Shaw, 2000).

For this proposed research, to gain an initial understanding of consumer attitudes towards CSR activities and their purchase behaviour, in-depth interviews, traditional and online observation, and documentary analysis will be applied. This approach has the advantage of giving depth and richness of data, whereas the combination of different techniques triangulates data in order to increase the internal validity of the study (Papaoikonomou et al., 2011).
For the interviews and focus group data, following Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis approach will be applied to interpret the qualitative data. Each interview will be transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Initial codes will be generated and the interview data collated to each code. Codes will then be aggregated into potential themes, and relevant data grouped to each theme. Themes will then be validated in reference to both Chinese and English transcripts, and subsequently refined before interpretation in the context of the literature.

Based on the initial study and extant previous research, the model will be revised as needed to build a fully developed model which is relevant to the Chinese context. Next, the revised model will be empirically tested, which is the primary focus of research.

For the main quantitative method, an approach of ‘in-built’ differentiated multiple replication study design (Lindsay et al., 1993; Uncles et al., 2004) using cross-sectional consumer surveys will be adopted to test the proposed conceptual model. Differentiated replication involves deliberate, or at least known, variations in fairly major aspects of the conditions of the study (Lindsay et al., 1993; Uncles et al., 2004). The aim is to extend the range of conditions under which the result still holds (Lindsay et al., 1993). Exploring a result with deliberate variations in the conditions of observation is the essence of generalisation of findings across different contexts (Lindsay et al., 1993; Barwise, 1995). Tsang and Kwan (1999) asserted that the lack of replication leads to a fragmented and dispersed literature with no sense of continuity, and replicability does not mean conclusive verification, and failure to replicate does not mean conclusive falsification. Data will be collected via modified questionnaire surveys from consumers across different industries with the assistance of the sponsor company, e.g. retail, tourism, private higher education, cosmetics, and food etc. The sampling frame used in this research will be drawn from a 5,000 random sample frame which is nation-wide, covering all the first tier cities (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen) in China, as well as the majority of the second tier cities (e.g. Tianjin, Chongqing, Xiamen, Nanjing, Xi’an etc.). For the quantitative data collected from the multiple replicated studies, correlation, regression and structural equation modeling by SPSS and AMOS will be adopted.

The Structure Equation Model (SEM) will be applied to test the conceptual model of structural relationships between CSR and consumers’ ethical attitude, perceived external and internal limitations and consumers’ ethical intention, and ultimately, purchase behaviour. SEM will be more appropriate in an examination of multi-dimensional issues (Hair et al., 1998). And using SEM correctly is critical to avoid missteps that could compromise the validity of results; to restrain from inferring incorrect conclusion; and to develop accurate knowledge about causal relationships among variables (Fan et al., 1999).

4. Expected Original Contributions

This study will provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the understanding of the ethical purchase behaviour of Chinese consumers. The results are expected to uncover the major factors that might affect consumer ethical purchase behaviour including corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and information, consumer ethical obligation and self-identity, and key external and internal limitations of adopting ethical buying behaviour in China, thus filling a critical gap in the literature of ethical consumerism. Moreover, this research will adopt nationwide data sets crossing different fields generated from multiple replication studies to achieve better generalisation, an approach that is desperately in need in marketing research yet rarely adopted in the academe. In practical terms, it is also hoped that the study can contribute to policy makers’ and business leaders to better promote the idea of ethical consumption and CSR in China.
References


