

Age & Ethics: An exploratory study into the intention to purchase organic food

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between two models of behaviour: the theory of planned behaviour; and the self determination theory, to develop insights into ethical consumption, specifically organic food shopping. It was found age is a key variable that influences a consumers' intention to purchase. This has implications for how marketing strategies are developed in order to influence consumption of goods based on ethical considerations. Specifically, it appears that when targeting young people, it is important to establish ethical attitudes that are rewarded consistently. For older people, it may be necessary to develop strategies for overcoming 'ethical fatigue' by appealing to their need for autonomy and subjective norm compliance.

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Introduction

Every day, individuals are presented with a magnitude of opportunities to purchase and consume. Our culture has fostered a consumer-oriented society as people not only consume to satisfy physical needs, but also to express their identity and values. It has been suggested that some individuals are questioning this orientation of our culture and have begun to question their consumption choices (James, 2008).

In order to understand the transition of consumer attitudes into consumer behaviour some researchers have turned to social psychological research. A dominant model of the attitude-behaviour relationship is the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), later developed into the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and a growing body of research has utilised the TPB to examine ethical consumption behaviours (Shaw, Shui and Clarke, 2000; Shaw and Shui, 2002a; Shaw and Shui, 2002b; Shaw and Shui, 2003; and Shaw et al, 2007). While useful, this literature does not explore the possibilities of other precedents to the cognitive decision making process as defined by the TPB. It also does not consider the way respondents age influence ethical purchasing processes.

Demographic variables such as age are one of the most basic and fundamental groups to which an individual can belong and the membership of these groups often has a profound influence on the individual (Morris et al, 2005). Previous studies utilising basic demographic factors such as age in conjunction with the TPB all confirm that variances among age groups do exist that effect intention (Holland, 2007; Morris and Venkatesh, 2000; and Morris et al 2005). All these studies recommend the use of such a demographic factor as a variable within the TPB in order to elicit a more accurate understanding of behaviour.

The association between demographic characteristics and ethical consumption measures are relatively complex. Given the increasing media coverage and political attention to the issues associated with ethical purchasing, these types of concerns are becoming more likely to be the social norm. Conversely ethical concerns for the environment are no longer marginal issues and high levels of awareness may be reflected in certain sectors of the population ignoring traditional demographic variables (Diamontopoulos et al, 2003). Diamontopoulos et al (2003) attempted to profile 'green consumers' in the UK using socio-demographic data and these authors concluded that 'none of the socio-demographic characteristics behaved exactly as hypothesized. Thus, an accurate profile of the green consumer cannot be constructed' (p.477). With the widespread growth of the organic food industry within Australia, an understanding of the factors that influence purchase intentions for different age groups is critical.

The aim of this research is to examine the role of basic psychological needs as potential drivers or antecedents of the beliefs that shape the TPB. The need for autonomy, competence and relatedness are posited to be universal and thought to influence a range of motivations and behaviours within what is known as self determination theory (SDT). Research suggests (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002) there is a complex relationship between the basic psychological needs and the attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control elements of TPB however to date this 'extended model' has not been applied in an ethical purchasing context. Further to this demographic variables such as age have also not been taken into consideration.

In order to address these shortfalls, the hypotheses for this research are:

H₁ – The ‘extended model’ (the combination of TBP and SDT) will be a stronger predictor of intention to purchase

H₂ – The ‘extended model’ will produce a better model fit to the data

H₃ – Age will independently influence the variables that predict intention to purchase

Methodology

In order to explore the possible relationships between the SDT and the TPB, and to see whether age of respondents influences intention to purchase, a quantitative research approach was chosen and a survey instrument was designed based on questions with proven ability to produce positive results for each of these models. The SDT questions were derived from Deci and Ryan’s (2000) Basic Need Satisfaction questionnaire. Questions to measure the TPB were derived from Cordano and Hanson Frieze’s (2000) article and in keeping with the original format a 7-point Likert scale ranging from Not at all True to Very True was employed. Questions relating to basic demographic information (including age) were located at the end of the survey.

The survey was conducted online and was ‘live’ for 10 days. An email was sent out to a convenience sample initially with the request to ‘snowball’ the invitation to participate in the research. Overall the sample comprised of 151 respondents, of which 33.8% were male and 66.2% were female. Most of the respondents were in the 26-30 year age group, which contributed to 42.8% of the respondents. To analyse the data retrieved from the survey and test the possible relationships between the variables, a series of multiple regression and path analyses was undertaken using SPSS Version 16.

Results

To address H₁ and H₂, Figures 1.0 and 1.1 indicate that the ‘extended model’ was not a better predictor of intention. The only significant path between the SDT and TPB was from autonomy to perceived behaviour control. The predictive ability of TPB alone is superior to the ‘extended model’ with the former explaining 63% of the variance compared to 48%. The model / data fit statistics displayed in Table 1.0 also support the efficacy of the TPB over the extended model.

Figure 1.0
Path Analysis Extended Model (non significant paths removed)

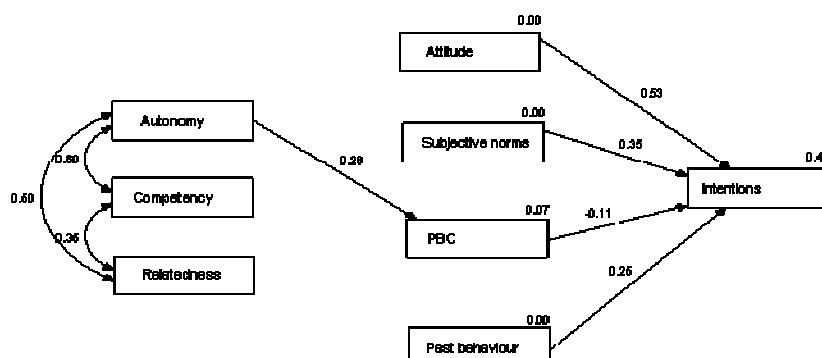


Figure 1.1
Path Analysis of TPB (non significant paths removed)

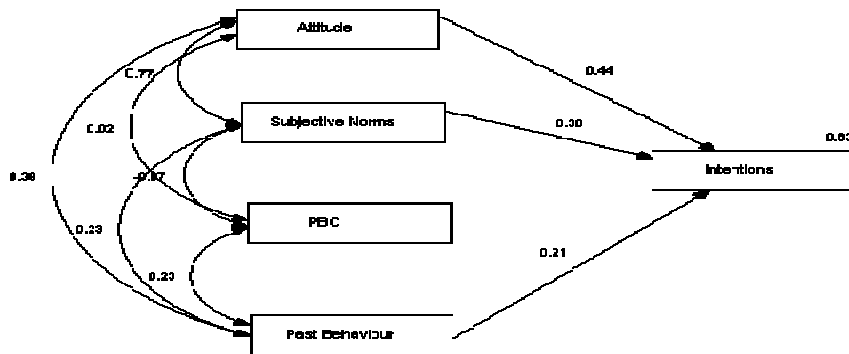


Table 1.0
Model / Data Fit Statistics

	TPB	Extended Model
Chi-square	2.96	180.47
Df	1	10
P	0.085	0.000
GFI	0.992	0.806
CFI	0.993	0.592
RMSEA	0.050	0.344

In order to address H3 the data were divided into two based on age. Young people were defined as everyone surveyed between 15 and 30 years old and 58% of the respondents to the survey were classified as young. Older people were defined as everyone surveyed who were older than 30 years and 42% of the respondents comprised this segment.

An examination of Table 1.1 indicates that for the young sample, the best predictor for intention to purchase is attitude, followed by past behaviour. For older people, the best predictor for intention to purchase is past behaviour, followed by autonomy and subjective norms. PBC is significant for older people however there is a negative result which means the more PBC the less this sample intend to buy ethically.

Table 1.1
Regression on Age on Variables

Age	R	R Squared	Adjusted R Squared
Young (15-30years)	0.837 a	0.700	0.672
Older (30+ years)	0.811 b	0.658	0.613

Age	Variable	Beta	T	Sig
Young	(Constant)		-2.427	0.018
	Attitude	0.522	4.049	0.000
	Past Behaviour	0.176	2.483	0.015
Older	(Constant)		0.242	0.810
	Autonomy	0.314	2.515	0.015
	Attitude	0.423	3.578	0.001
	Past Behaviour	0.324	3.337	0.002
	PBC	-0.315	-3.314	0.002
	Subjective Norms	0.256	2.390	0.020

Discussion

Despite significant correlations between the three psychological needs there was only one significant path to the TPB; autonomy to perceived behavioural control (PBC). There were no direct relationships between autonomy and attitudes or subjective norms despite attitudes having the strongest path or influence onto intention to purchase. This finding is somewhat consistent with Shen, McCaughy and Martin's (2007) research that explored the influence of basic psychological needs and the TPB in relation to physical activity behaviour in leisure time. These authors suggested that only having one significant path between autonomy and PBC does not necessarily reflect a weakness in the compatibility between the two models, rather a reflection of the close relationship between competence and autonomy.

Despite the lack of significant paths between the needs and the TPB, the results did produce some interesting findings within the TPB model. Significant paths were found between intention, attitude and subjective norms which were expected. Attitude is the most dominant influencer of intention and this is consistent with previous research relating to the TPB (Conner and Armitage, 1998). Overall the TPB model was found to be a robust option for researchers wishing to explore in more detail ethical consumer behaviour.

When the data was analysed using *age* as a segmenting tool, the variables for predicting intention to purchase produced differing results for those classified as younger and older in the sample. Autonomy was a significant predictor of intentions for the older sample suggesting that those with higher levels of autonomy are more likely to purchase organic food. The need for autonomy is reflected in a person's desire to be in control of their own destiny and high levels of autonomy are associated with intrinsic motivation where one acts out of more altruistic reasons rather than seeking financial or hedonic rewards. Given that organic food is more expensive and associated with sustainable farming principles it seems logical that those with high autonomy would be attracted towards this kind of purchase.

Why this is not the case for the younger sample needs to be further assessed. Is it because the younger consumers do not feel that autonomy is achieved through consumption decisions? Or do younger consumers involve themselves more 'superficially' in their choices? The wider implication for marketers appealing to a consumer's sense of autonomy requires further investigation particularly if this approach ignores or does not appeal to a significant segment of the potential audience.

The attitude variable was the strongest predictor for intention when the data was analysed as a whole. Despite this, attitude was the second significant predictor of intention for the older sample. This suggests older shoppers may have a weakened sense of connection between their beliefs and the probability that ethical food shopping decisions will satisfy or affirm their beliefs. In turn, this implies older shoppers may suffer some form of 'ethical fatigue' perhaps a result of accumulating unrequited ethical purchasing decisions over time.

In both samples, past behaviour plays a significant role. Therefore those who have purchased organic produce before are much more likely to repeat this purchase behaviour than those who have not. This is consistent with fundamental marketing theory and intuitive logic particularly for low involvement purchases such as food. The purchasing of organic food however, as an ethical consumption activity (Shaw and Shui, 2003) could be viewed as a high involvement decision often requiring the consumer to weigh up social and ecological importance, in conjunction with price, style, taste and a multitude of other variables that might influence the consumer. With this in mind, it is interesting to see the growth being experienced in the organic food industry (IBIS Report, Feb 2009). This growth seems to

demonstrate a shift in attitude and overall approach towards ethical food but also reinforces the idea that once people start purchasing organic food, they will continue.

From a practical marketing perspective, the consistently high influence of past behaviour reflects the habitual nature of food purchasing decisions. This habit or routine can be a positive force when consumers are already purchasing products that marketers are aiming to sell. However it can be a challenge to change this habit. Going with 'what you know' or have tried before, particularly if the outcome of a previous experience was positive, results in the consumer being likely to repeat the activity. This finding supports the concept of 'try before you buy' and free samples, which often works for a new product available in saturated markets such as food.

Conclusion

This research provides many insights for marketers of ethical products, in particular organic food. The research suggests that past behaviour can be considered a significant influence on purchasing decisions across all demographics. For younger people, attitudes are likely to be the strongest predictor of intention to purchase organic food, whereas for older people, a sense of autonomy will be. For marketers this reinforces the importance of offering free trials or testers to potential customers coupled with a positive experience to affirm the relationship between customer attitude (for young people) or sense of autonomy (for older people) and the purchasing decision. This will increase the likelihood of ethical purchasing habit formation.

The research also suggests that organic food shopping, is sensitive to age. Despite some previous research arguing that ethically concerned consumers could not be segregated by basic socio demographic factors, this research suggests that age definitely alters the intention to purchase process. This should be considered in order to tailor marketing messages, product placement and distribution channels.

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