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Consumers' purchasing decisions regarding environmentally friendly products: An empirical analysis of German consumers

Andrea K. Moser^{a,b}^a Institute for Industrial Ecology, Pforzheim University, Pforzheim, Germany^b Centre for Sustainability Management, Leuphana University Lueneburg, Lueneburg, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Research in the area of environmentally friendly purchasing behavior reports inconsistent findings. It is also unclear which factors determine real buying behavior. Therefore, the present study develops a model which identifies major factors forming self-reported purchasing behavior (SRB). A structural equation approach is used to integrate these measures and to test if they are able to predict actual purchasing behavior. Data was obtained from a nationwide panel ($n = 1760$) and included survey data and retail scanner data for seven different product categories in the sector of goods for daily needs. Results show that consumers care for the environment and mirror environmental attitudes in their purchasing behavior (self-reported). Especially norms and willingness to pay are strong predictors of SRB. However, SRB is not transferred to actual purchasing behavior. Therefore, the findings corroborate the gap between stated and actual behavior. Implications for marketing are derived to encourage consumers to purchase environmentally friendly products. In the end, this not only produces benefits for the environment, but also creates opportunities for businesses.

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1. Introduction

Environmentally friendly or “green” buying behavior is one of the domains in which consumers are able to transfer their environmental concerns into corresponding actions. Green behavior reflects actions that are carried out with the aim of optimizing the environmental consequences to meet the needs of current and future generations. Green consumers and their buying behavior are well examined fields of research (for a discussion see Peattie (2001)). Buying organic products is the most popular action to reduce an individual's environmental impact (Isenhour, 2010).

Markets for green products such as organic produce are steadily growing (Bund ökologischer Landwirtschaft (BÖLW), 2016; U. S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2014). This development not only produces benefits for the environment, but also creates opportunities for businesses which engage in this growing niche market. Research found that companies and retailers which implement green strategies achieve higher profitability and market shares (Menguc and Ozanne, 2005), greater levels of employee commitment (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001), increased customer satisfaction (Lombart and Louis, 2014; Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006) and a more positive image (Lavorata, 2014). However, findings about the relationship between consumers'

attitudes and environmentally friendly behavior are still inconsistent. It is also unclear which factors determine real buying behavior. Most studies that analyze green purchasing behavior either focus on behavioral intention as a proxy for behavior (Auger et al., 2008; Lu et al., 2015; Schuitema and Groot, 2015) or rely on self-reported survey data (Follows and Jobber, 2000). Although some studies analyze real purchasing behavior, they only focus on attitude and its predecessors as a predictor of behavior (Hauser et al., 2013; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2009).

The present study focuses on consumers' purchasing decisions with reference to environmentally-friendly products. In contrast to prior research in this field, the study takes into account more predictors than just attitude. The conceptualized model also integrates personal norms and willingness to pay (WTP) as further promising factors which might explain behavior. Hence, the relative importance and the respective structure of each single factor can be revealed. The model also contrasts measures of stated attitudes and behavior with measures of actual behavior. Thus, the model tests if these factors are able to predict actual green purchasing behavior. In sum, the study contributes to the understanding of green purchasing behavior. Main drivers of green purchasing behavior can be identified while simultaneously modeling the potential gaps between (a) attitude and behavior and (b) self-reported and actual behavior. The results of the study provide a better understanding of self-reported and actual purchasing behavior in seven different product categories. Thus, the

E-mail address: andrea.moser@hs-pforzheim.de

present study responds to the call for more research at the product category level (Padel and Foster, 2005) and even expands research to further product categories beyond organic food.

2. Conceptualization and hypotheses development

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) is widely applied and acknowledged to explain environmentally friendly behavior (Bamberg and Möser, 2007; Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011; Paul et al., 2016). It has also been supported with regard to organic products (Honkanen et al., 2006; Kim and Chung, 2011; Pino et al., 2012; Zhou et al., 2013). According to the TPB, behavior is guided by three major factors: attitude, subjective norm and perception of behavioral control (PBC). Individuals are expected to act in accordance with these factors if the opportunity arises (Ajzen, 2002). Expected positive and negative consequences of a certain behavior influence their behavioral decisions (Bamberg and Möser, 2007). Consequently, green purchasing behavior is based on the expected benefits and costs of buying green products. However, certain specific issues come up in the context of green purchasing. Therefore, the present study falls back on the TPB to explain green purchasing behavior, but makes several adjustments to better reflect the conditions in which green purchasing is carried out. Precisely, the conceptual framework replaces social norms with personal norms. It also pays special attention to the role of perceived behavioral control (PBC) and intention. The reasoning behind these adjustments along with hypothesized relationships is discussed in detail below.

2.1. Attitude towards the protection of the environment

If behavior is not constrained by being expensive or difficult to perform, attitudes have a great predictive value for behavior (Stern, 2000). Shopping behavior can be interpreted as such a low-cost domain in which green behavior is feasible with low behavioral costs and little inconvenience. Preferring a green product from the shelf to a conventional product seems much easier than e.g. changing modes of mobility. In such low-cost situations, general attitudes regarding environmental protection have a significant positive influence on green behavior (Diekmann and Preisendörfer, 2003). However, results concerning the influence of attitudes are inconsistent. Some studies identify a weak link between attitude and behavior which suggests a gap (Gupta and Ogden, 2009; Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Peattie, 2001). Other studies, in contrast, put forward counterevidence. In the context of organic food, attitudes account for up to more than half of the variance of pro-environmental behavior (Hauser et al., 2013; Honkanen et al., 2006; Pino et al., 2012; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2009; Zhou et al., 2013) and might even be the most powerful factor to explain green buying (Kim and Chung, 2011; Tanner and Wölfling Kast, 2003). This inconclusive evidence makes it necessary to analyze the precise impact of attitude in the present context. Given the low-cost domain as well as positive results from studies analyzing purchasing behavior of products for daily needs, hypothesis 1 is proposed as follows:

H1. Consumer's attitude towards the protection of the environment positively affects self-reported green purchasing behavior.

2.2. Personal norm

The TPB postulated subjective norms as a social factor influencing decision making. Social norms relate to the perceived pressure of complying with a certain behavior (Ajzen, 1991). These norms reflect a certain way of behavior that people agree upon.

They represent attitudes and values of significant others. Social norms, though, are too general to guide behavior. Consequently, they do not significantly influence behavior (Harries et al., 2013). Individuals adopt social norms by incorporating them into a personal value system. Hence, these social norms become more specific personal norms (Davies et al., 2002). Whereas social norms refer to external pressure, personal norms mirror individual moral rules (Arvola et al., 2008). In the context of organic food, personal norms have been found to be a more useful predictor of behavior than social norms. Studies which integrate both constructs conclude that personal norms are a strong predictor for behavior, whereas social norms do not significantly correlate with behavior (Thøgersen, 2002). Thus, personal considerations rather than social pressure seem to dominate decision making. Therefore, it seems reasonable to integrate personal norms into the behavioral model instead of social norms.

Personal norms depict individuals' moral standards (Schwartz, 1977). Whereas social norms reflect a broader feeling of social sentiments, personal norms reflect what specifically should be done (Osterhus, 1997). Moral considerations have become important factors in decision making. A growing number of consumers boycott companies because the companies apply unethical practices or sell environmentally harmful or socially unacceptable products (Thøgersen, 1999). Thus, moral considerations influence purchasing behavior. It has been demonstrated that personal norms are important factors in the context of green behavior (Jansson et al., 2010). Such norms have a positive impact on behavior and are powerful in influencing not only current behavior, but also general consumption patterns. Buying organic food, for example, reinforces personal norms over time. Simultaneously, experience in buying organic food reduces consumers' ambivalence and, hence, leads to favorable changes in beliefs about the cost of performing such behavior (Thøgersen and Ölander, 2006).

In sum, personal norms refer to internal moral convictions which are based on benefits for others. In the present context, personal norms can for instance relate to specific options or ethical preferences for certain products from which the environment or animals benefit. Personal norms seem to have an overall positive effect on behavior. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is proposed as follows:

H2. Personal norms reflecting ethical motives positively affect self-reported green purchasing behavior.

2.3. Perceived behavioral control

Consumers are willing to choose environmentally friendly products and place high importance on green attributes, for instance when they buy food (Gadema and Oglethorpe, 2011) or dishwashers (Richter, 2010). Implementing green purchasing, however, does not just simply happen. Consumers face obstacles and difficulties hindering them from behaving accordingly. The concept of perceived behavioral control (PBC) reflects such complicating circumstances and accounts for conditions facilitating or complicating behavior (Ajzen, 2002). Judgments of PBC are shaped by beliefs concerning whether one has access to the necessary resources and opportunities to perform the behavior successfully (Ajzen, 1991). PBC reflects people's perception of control and their beliefs of being able to behave in a desired way. Hence, PBC is similar to the idea of barriers or self-efficacy (Ajzen, 2002) and stresses the importance of situational constraints (Bamberg and Möser, 2007). For the most part, studies neglect to specify constraints or barriers which might hinder consumers to carry out intended behavior. Instead, PBC is operationalized by asking direct questions about the ease or difficulty of performing a certain action (Bamberg, 2003; Kim and Chung, 2011). This leaves considerable scope for interpretations on part of the respondents.

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