Ethically minded consumer behavior: Scale review, development, and validation

Lynn Sudbury-Riley [a,*], Florian Kohlbacher [b,1]

[a] School of Management, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool L69 7ZH, UK
[b] German Institute for Japanese Studies, Jochi Kioizaka Bldg. 2F 7-1, Kioicho, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0094, Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper details the development and validation of a new research instrument called the ethically minded consumer behavior (EMCB) scale. The scale conceptualizes ethically minded consumer behavior as a variety of consumption choices pertaining to environmental issues and corporate social responsibility. Developed and extensively tested among consumers ($n = 1278$) in the UK, Germany, Hungary, and Japan, the scale demonstrates reliability, validity, and metric measurement invariance across these diverse nations. The study provides researchers and practitioners with a much-needed and easy-to-administer, valid, and reliable instrument pertaining to ethically minded consumer behavior.

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1. Introduction

More businesses realize the need to consider ecological and human welfare implications when adopting sustainable development principles (Chow and Chen, 2012). At the same time, ethical consumer behavior, which incorporates the consideration of ecological and human welfare issues, is increasing dramatically (Fairtrade International, 2013). Spurred partly by the Fairtrade movement that attracts attention from mainstream brands (Low and Davenport, 2007), ethical products are no longer the remit of niche markets in many nations (Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell, 2014; Doherty and Tranchell, 2007). Indeed, increasing numbers of products bear the marks of initiatives such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance, or make a variety of social or environmental claims (Ethical Trading Initiative, 2010). Unsurprisingly, research pertaining to different aspects of ethical business practices is also increasing (Chow and Chen, 2012). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is now one of the most prominent and important concepts in the literature (Lee, Park, Rapert, and Newman, 2012) with an abundance of recent papers focusing on different aspects of marketing and consuming ethical products (Andorfer and Liebe, 2012; Auger, Burke, Devinney, Louviere, and Burke, 2010; Autio, Heiskanen, and Heinonen, 2009; d'Astous and Legendre, 2008).

Only as recently as the 1990s did research begin to focus more strongly on ethics from a consumer rather than a corporate perspective (Schlegelmilch and Öberseder, 2010), and it seems that measurement scales pertaining to consumer ethical purchases are rare, especially in comparison to the scales available to measure ethics in business decisions. Even when ethical research does focus on consumers, it tends to emphasize environmental issues, with fewer studies incorporating wider social issues (O'Rourke, 2011). Consequently, despite the fact that ethical consumers are no longer classified as fringe (Carrington et al., 2014), and ethical products and services now account for increasing shares of many different markets (Ethical Consumer Markets Report, 2012), it is still relatively unusual to find reliable and validated scales pertaining to ethical consumer behavior that incorporate both ecological and social issues. The need for such a scale is pressing, given the current "burgeoning social movement" (Carrington et al., 2014, p. 2759) that is ethical consumerism. Of course, observational research has an advantage over self-report measures as it analyses what people do rather than what they claim to do. However, while technology is allowing for easier use of observational data in terms of scanner-tracking and Internet purchases (Lee and Broderick, 2007), it is still not possible to collect accurate data for every individual purchase. Consequently, there remains a need for a psychometrically sound, reliable, and validated scale to use as a shorthand method to indicate the levels and types of ethical purchasing claimed by different individuals. Such a scale would enable the collection of valuable and timely information from large numbers of people in relatively short periods and reasonably cost effectively and be useful to businesses, researchers, and policy makers. Businesses need a valid and reliable instrument that is comparatively quick and easy to administer in order to gather quantifiable data to analyze and profile different groups, for planning and forecasting

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 1517952553.
    E-mail addresses: l.sudbury-riley@liverpool.ac.uk (L. Sudbury-Riley),
Kohlbacher@dijtokyo.org (F. Kohlbacher).
    [1] Permanent address: International Business School Suzhou (IBSS), Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, (XJTLU), 111 Ren'ai Road, Suzhou Dushu Lake Higher Education Town, Jiangsu Province, 215123, PR China.

purposes and to develop segmentation models to design more accurate targeting and positioning strategies. Researchers need such an instrument to use in future studies to ascertain the different underlying motivations and antecedents for ethical purchasing, and just as importantly uncover and analyze the barriers to such purchasing because as Gleim et al. (2013) recently point out, well-grounded theoretical studies to explain why consumers do not engage in environmentally sustainable behavior are rare. Moreover, a standard scale, particularly one that exhibits measurement invariance, is a potentially valuable research tool for comparative and longitudinal research purposes in a variety of nations in order to create new theories and or test existing hypotheses (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981). Finally, policy makers need to understand the reasons for not consuming ethically in order to begin to address and change behavior because despite phenomenal increases in recent years, sales of ethical goods and services still remain a small percentage of total sales; thus, sustainable solutions will require policy intervention (Ethical Consumer Markets Report, 2012).

There are, of course, some scales pertaining to ethical consumption already available. However, many of the existing instruments measure attitudes, intentions, or utilize hypothetical scenarios (Trudel and Cotte, 2008), which are problematic because of the well-documented attitude–behavior gap (Carrington et al., 2014). Empirical evidence shows that stated ethical intentions rarely translate into actual ethical consumer choices (Carrigan et al., 2011). Of the few remaining instruments that do pertain to actual behavior, the older instruments tend to focus solely on environmental issues and omit wider social considerations (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996), while more recent ones tend to focus exclusively on a specific aspect of ethical consumption such as Fairtrade (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000) and do not consider a wide range of issues. A scale that considers both environmental and social issues is important because recently differences in consumer reactions to these different strands of ethical consumption have emerged (Ailawadi, Neslin, Luan, and Taylor, 2014). Yet only one scale, the socially responsible consumer behavior (SRCB) scale (Roberts 1993, 1995), utilizes wording that asks consumers to recall their actual ethical consumption (as opposed to intended, hypothetical, or attitudes toward ethical issues) from both environmental and CSR perspectives.

The SRCB scale is however two decades old, and during these years, the world has changed dramatically. Harrison (2014) charts the rise of ethical consumers from the 1990s – the development period for the SRCB scale – to the present day. He finds that during the 1990s, surveys revealed 20–30% of people professed that they could not be bothered with any form of ethical consumption, while a further 60–75% were sometimes ethical but did not really work very hard to seek out ethical alternatives. He finds that it is not until the latter years of the first decade of this century that ethical consumption becomes truly mainstream in that it crosses cultures, classes, and geographical boundaries. In the UK alone, the sale of ethical goods and services has grown 360% since the turn of the century (Ethical Consumer Markets Report, 2012). Moreover, some of the scale items in the SRCB refer to practices that are now illegal (e.g., discrimination against minorities), while other items are no longer relevant and instead reflect the different political landscape of two decades ago (e.g., I do not buy products from companies that have investments in South Africa). The SRCB scale was clearly ahead of its time when it was developed. However, in its current format, it is no longer valid in a world that has changed so dramatically since its inception. Nevertheless, the SRCB instrument proved invaluable as a starting point to the current scale development study, from which emerges a new instrument called the ethically minded consumer behavior (EMCB) scale. The current study therefore fills a gap in that it develops a scale comprising questions pertaining to actual behavior rather than intentions or hypothetical situations. Of course, any self-report measure that depends on honesty and accuracy from respondents has limitations, but because it asks about actual behavior, it has advantages over those scales that measure ethical attitudes or intentions that are very poor indicators of what people actually do at the checkout (Cowe

and Williams, 2000). The new scale comprises a range of ethically minded consumption choices, better reflecting contemporary ideas of what ethical consumption is.

The study is also relatively unique in that it develops and validates the scale using consumers in 4 diverse nations (UK, Germany, Hungary, and Japan). This paper justifies and validates the new scale. It begins by conceptualizing ethical consumer behavior before reviewing the available instruments that measure it. It then justifies the samples and the chosen nations prior to explaining the development and validation of the new measurement instrument. It concludes with an evaluation of the new scale and discusses its implications for research and practice.

2. Background

This section has three major purposes: (1) to conceptualize ethical consumption from today's perspective in order to identify broad themes that needed to be included in the new scale, (2) to explain the implications of the attitude–behavior gap for scale development, and (3) to review the available instruments pertaining to ethical consumer choices.

2.1. Conceptualizing ethical consumption

Historically, ethical consumption was viewed very much as the behavior of a relatively small group of principled consumers (Shaw, 2007), while ethical brands (e.g., The Body Shop) were easy to identify. However, as the numbers of ethical brands increase in conjunction with ease of access to data pertaining to ethical products (O'Connor, 2014), there is a marked diversity in terms of definitions of ethical consumer behavior, and some terms seem to be more fluid than before. The concept of Fairtrade, for example, has developed from a focus on marginalized producers to incorporate broader social justice issues (Becchetti and Costantino, 2010). Nevertheless, from a starting point that assumes ethical purchasing is conscious and based on a particular ethical or social issue (Ethical Consumerism Report, 2011; Gulyás, 2008) rather than based on taste, color, or design, it was possible to identify several important issues that needed to be included in the new scale.

First, most definitions of ethical consumption encompass reference to environmental issues (Ethical Consumerism Report, 2011; European Commission, 2011; IGD, 2007; Trudel and Cotte, 2008). Interestingly, while a plethora of studies include a wide range of different environmentally friendly issues and behavior (Abdul-Muhmin, 2007; Gilg, Barr and Ford, 2005; Kim and Choi, 2005; Niva and Timonen, 2001), almost all mention recycling issues specifically (Autio et al., 2009; Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo, 2001; Straughan and Roberts, 1999; Sudbury-Riley, 2014; Thøgersen, 1999; Vicente and Reis, 2007), perhaps because recycling of household waste is becoming a normal everyday behavior for many people, due in part to various recycling policies and programs in many countries (DEFRA, 2014; EPA, 2014; European Commission, 2014).

Second, most definitions of ethical consumption include social justice and human rights issues (Auger et al., 2010; Ethical Consumerism Report, 2011; European Commission, 2011; Golding, 2009; Trudel and Cotte, 2008; Valor, 2007), often with a particular emphasis on involvement in worker exploitation (Brenton and Hacken, 2006; Eckhardt, Belk, and Devinney, 2010; Valor, 2007). Beyond these mainstream issues, wider-ranging definitions focus on animal welfare (Megicks, Memery and Williams, 2008) and local community initiatives (Carrigan et al., 2011; Grau and Garretsen Folse, 2007; Mattingly and Berman, 2006). Overlapping animal welfare and local community issues is the topic of organic food, and indeed many consumers purchase organic food for animal welfare reasons and/or to support their local communities (McEachern et al., 2007; Schröder and McEachern, 2004).

The third theme pertains to consciously refusing to not buy products (Carrigan et al., 2004), or boycotting. Boycotting is a form of anti-consumption and, inter alia, can be targeted at particular products