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The effect of purchase situation on realized pro-environmental consumer behavior☆

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ABSTRACT

Why do pro-environmental consumers not always make pro-environmental purchases? Little research exists on the role of purchase situations (Belk, 1975). This study analyzes whether purchase situation explains why customers' intentions do not always align with their pro-environmental purchase behavior. Carrington, Neville, and Whitwell's (2010) model, that proposes situational context plays a key role in altering the trajectory of good intentions as they transfer to actual behavior, is also employed. This study empirically tests, using Australian consumers (n = 772), the effect of purchase situations on the disparity between intentions and purchase behavior. The results show that purchase situation moderates the intention–behavior relationship, and that time, price, willingness to drive long distances, availability, and ease of purchase influence the relationship. The findings have theoretical implications for understanding the factors that affect consumers' purchase behavior, and practical implications for how to realize pro-environmental consumer behavior.

1. Introduction

Kotler's (2011) article on reinventing marketing to manage the environmental imperative puts much of the burden of pro-environmental consumer behavior (PECB) on marketers. Typical PECB includes the purchase of environmentally responsible products; products that minimize environmental impact; products from firms with good environmental reputations, or products whose production implies biodegradable, carbon neutral, or recycled inputs (Cleveland, Kalamas, & Laroche, 2012). However, this may not be the entire story. Although research indicates that certain consumer segments intend to do 'good' by planning to make pro-environmental purchase decisions (Diamantopoulos, Schlegelmilch, Sinkovics, & Bohlen, 2003; Hartmann & Ibáñez, 2006), considerable evidence suggests the non-realization of some of these planned intentions (Carrington et al., 2010; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). Indeed, various constraints restrict otherwise environmentally-oriented consumers from realizing their PECB intentions.

Belk (1975) notes that differences between intentions and behavior are often due to situational factors, and Carrington et al. (2010) explicitly integrate situational context into a model that attempts to explain why consumers who intend to purchase certain types of products do not always do so. Relevant research on the relationship between attitudes, intentions, and behavior often builds on Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) Theory of Reasoned Action or its extension the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Under these models, a disparity may occur between consumers' attitudes and their intentions, and/or between their intentions and their behavior. Most research on PECB focuses on the first disparity, assuming that intention is a reasonable proxy for behavior (e.g. Glasman & Albarricin, 2006; Grimmer & Bingham, 2013; Polonsky, Garma, & Grau, 2011). The Carrington et al. (2010) model specifically emphasizes the second disparity, and presents the concept of 'implementation intentions' (or plans) as a mediating variable between intentions and behavior, with situational context as a moderating variable. These authors contend that attitude–intention–behavior models of consumer behavior typically ignore the effect of the purchase situation on purchase behavior. The aim of this research is to examine how purchase situation and plans affect the translation of intentions to purchase pro-environmental products into actual behavior.

The findings of the research have theoretical implications for understanding the factors that affect consumers' purchase behavior, and the constraints affecting the realization of intentions into behavior. The research will help marketers design more effective promotional initiatives to influence pro-environmental purchase behavior, and will assist policy makers and regulators to confront environmental issues.

2. The role of purchase situations in pro-environmental consumer behavior

Belk (1975) outlines a number of contextual factors that potentially affect a consumer's purchase behavior, and provides a taxonomy of purchase situations that includes: (1) physical; (2) social; (3) temporal; (4) task, and (5) antecedent states. Each of these factors can have a

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different effect. For example, regarding the physical environment of the purchase situation, in the case of Whole Foods, the physical retail design aims to support and encourage PECB. Likewise, firms such as Panera have a social community through Panera Cares that supports socially sustainable consumption. Time pressures can also influence the ability of a consumer to realize their PECB. For example, the interactions between physical and temporal situations may limit a consumer's ability to engage in PECB because of work and commuting pressures. Additionally, the purpose of the purchase can affect PECB, either positively or negatively. Parents shopping for milk for their infant may be in a task-specific situation where they fully realize their PECB intentions to purchase only certified organic fresh milk through an extensive search for 'safe and organic milk'. Realization then can occur even when the parent is subject to influences from other situational constraints such as time pressures or family budget restrictions. Likewise, temporal issues such as time of day, store congestion, or potential changes at work could restrict a consumer's ability to realize their plans (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Polonsky, Vocino, Grimmer, & Miles, 2014).

Carrington et al. (2010) also state that situations are important in understanding the PECB intention–behavior gap. The Carrington et al. (2010) model suggests that implementation intentions—or plans—mediate the relationship between intention and behavior. In other words, implementation intentions account for the link between the intention and the realized behavior (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The positive nature of this relationship suggests that strong implementation intentions (such as a strong and complete plan to purchase an environmentally-friendly product) have a positive influence on actual behavior.

The model includes two moderating variables—actual behavioral control and situational context—for the relationship between implementation intentions and behavior, the latter being the focus of this research. Carrington et al. (2010) argue that the presence of a positive situational context facilitates the translation of plans into actual behavior. For example, if a consumer has time to consider the information available for a given product, or has a high disposable income, or if a retailer has extensive availability of green products, then the consumer will be more likely to carry out their plans.

This study examines a range of situational effects on the realization of intentions to purchase pro-environmental products into actual purchase behavior. This research is important because, since Belk (1975), very little work focuses on the influence of purchase situation. The Carrington et al. (2010) model provides a framework for how intentions lead to behavior, specifically employing implementation intentions—plans—as a mediator. This research represents an initial test of aspects of the model. The expectation is that the purchase situation moderates the relationship between purchase intentions and the formation of plans, as well as the relationship between plans and PECB. If the results confirm the expectation, purchase situation would influence each of the proposed relationships (intention–plan and plan–PECB) such that a positive situational context would facilitate the relationship and a negative situational context would weaken the relationship. Fig. 1 shows the conceptual model for the research.

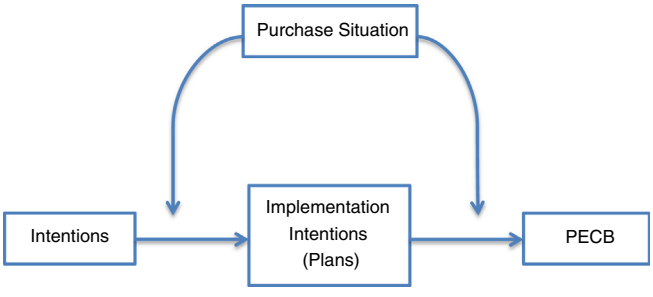

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

The Carrington et al. (2010) model indicates that intention leads to plans, which then lead to behavior; therefore, plans act as a mediator between intention and behavior.

H1. Plans will positively mediate the relationship between intention and pro-environmental consumer behavior.

As the conceptual model shows, after the establishment of mediation, purchase situation will influence the relationship between intentions and plans, as well as plans and PECB (Carrington et al., 2010; Coleman, Bahnan, Kelkar, & Curry, 2011).

H2. A favorable purchase situation will positively moderate the relationship between intention and the formation of plans to purchase pro-environmental products.

H3. A favorable purchase situation will positively moderate the relationship between plans and pro-environmental consumer behavior.

3. Method

3.1. Sample frame and characteristics

Using a commercial research panel, Australian consumers answered a two-stage online survey. Participants represented the wider Australian population in terms of age and gender and distribution across the Australian states and territories. 1019 participants answered the first stage of the survey. One week after this stage closed, participants could choose to complete the second stage of the survey. This resulted in a final sample of 772. Sample characteristics appear in Table 1.

3.2. Operationalization of constructs and survey instrument

Measures from existing research are used as one way to reduce the risk of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The measures are as follows:

3.2.1. Intention (independent variable)

This is the resolution to achieve a desired outcome (e.g., to buy an environmentally-friendly product) (Dholakia, Bagozzi, & Gopinath, 2007). The study employs a single item measure, based on Bergkvist

Table 1
Sample characteristics.

Age: mean = 48.37 (SD = 15.40)		Gender:	
18–24 years	7.90%	Male	46.20%
25–34 years	16.60%	Female	53.80%
34–44 years	21.40%	State/Territory:	
45–54 years	23.20%	ACT	1.80%
55–64 years	18.50%	New South Wales	34.60%
65 plus years	12.40%	Northern Territory	0.90%
Education:		Queensland	17.10%
No high school to Yr 10	3.20%	South Australia	8.30%
High school to Yr 10	13.50%	Tasmania	2.60%
High school to Yr 12	17.40%	Victoria	24.20%
Trade qual. or apprent. or TAFE Cert/Dip	33.00%	Western Australia	10.50%
Bachelor deg (inc. hons)	20.70%		
Postgrad. coursework Cert/Dip/Degree	8.80%	Marital status:	
Research masters or PhD	3.40%	Single, never married	23.10%
Household (pre-tax) annual income:		Married	50.30%
$24,999 and under	13.30%	De-facto	12.80%
$25,000–$49,999	19.90%	Separated, not divorc.	2.70%
$50,000–$74,999	17.90%	Divorced	7.60%
$75,000–$99,999	11.80%	Widowed	3.50%
$100,000–$124,999	9.70%	Children living at home?	
$125,000–$149,999	5.70%	Yes	37.80%
$150,000 and over	5.70%	No	62.20%
Do not wish to disclose	15.90%		

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