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Understanding Chinese consumers' ethical purchasing decision-making process: A combination of qualitative and quantitative study

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ABSTRACT

As with all shopping, there is a wide gap between ethical shopping intention and behavior, and consumers' ethical shopping processes are very complicated. Through a two-stage study, this paper analyzes those underlying factors that prevent consumers from translating their stated ethical intentions into actual ethical buying behavior. An initial qualitative study uses in-depth interviews with 36 consumers and identifies 6 consumer personal factors and 5 shopping situational factors impeding the transformation of consumers' stated ethical intentions into actual ethical behavior. In the second stage, a quantitative study uses a large-scale questionnaire, investigating 1200 consumers, to test the adaptability of these personal and situational factors and to investigate their moderating effects on the relationship between ethical intentions and behavior. The findings show that among the personal factors and in addition to ethical consciousness, economic rationality, buying inertia, cynicism, and ethical cognitive efforts all have significant moderating roles on the relationship between ethical intention and action; further, all of the situational factors have moderating effects upon the relationship between intention and action. Finally, the paper provides us with some profound conclusions and insightful implications about how to motivate consumer support for firms' ethical behavior and how to transfer this type of support into truly positive purchasing behavior.

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Introduction

In recent years, such shocking words as melamine, gutter oil, Sudan red, lean meat powder, and malachite green have been appearing in Chinese media with unprecedented frequency. The unethical events associated with these terms have attracted ethical concern among consumers and further promoted the growth of ethical consumption in China. A survey released by the WPP Group in 2009 showed that consumers in China were particularly inclined to seek green products and to favor companies they considered to be green; 73% of consumers claimed that they would spend more money on green products in the coming year.¹

In fact, shopping has become a decision-making process related to morality and/or ethics and as such, consumers' ethical demands are an important source of marketing power that can directly influence firms' operational and management decision making (Patrick et al., 2003). Consumers are increasingly willing to consider the influence of their private consumption behaviors on issues related to social ethics and thereby attempt to bring about social change

through their purchasing behavior (Webster, 1975; Muncy and Vitell, 1992; Deng, 2012). Examples of such behavior in China include consumers' boycotting of pirated goods and support for companies that have acted ethically in response to disasters.

However, empirical evidence suggests that although increasing numbers of consumers have absorbed and are motivated by the values of ethical consumerism, a change in actual consumption behavior is much less apparent (Carrington et al., 2010; Arvola et al., 2008, etc.). At the cash register, consumers seldom translate their stated intention toward ethical consumption into actual purchasing behavior (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrington et al., 2010; Carrington and Attalla, 2001). For instance, in exploring Chinese consumers' responses to firms' ethical actions, Deng (2012) found that approximately 44% of consumers will respond positively to companies' ethical actions. However, only 12% of them will take real purchasing action, which means that nearly 32% of consumers will not "walk their talk," so to speak.

As a matter of fact the above research demonstrates that the consumer ethical shopping process is complicated (Bray et al., 2011) and the intention-behavior gap of ethical consumption does have far-reaching impacts on companies' ethical marketing activities. In practice, marketing strategies with an ethical orientation

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¹ Green Brands Global Survey, 22nd July, 2009, <http://www.wpp.com/wpp/press/2009/jul/22/green-brands-global-survey-published/>.

are being widely adopted to tap into potentially profitable ethical market segments and to promote ethically responsible and environmentally sustainable credentials for products, brands, services and corporations (Carrington et al., 2010). However, if firms make production and investment decisions simply based on consumers' ethical intentions, it could, most likely, result in costly failures. Therefore, understanding the ethical decision-making process is important: in particular, it is critical to understand the gap between what ethically minded consumers intend and what they actually do at the point of purchase and to understand how to close this gap. Although a few scholars such as Areni and Black (2008), and Carrington et al. (2010) have explored this ethical purchasing gap, their studies were still at an exploratory stage and only used qualitative methods. This article attempts to contribute to ethical decision-making theory based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques and study in China. Understanding the intention-behavior gap of ethically minded consumers is helpful in expanding the market possibilities for ethical products in China and this analysis offers an important platform on which to build the ethical reputation of a company.

Ethical consumption theory

In the field of ethical consumerism, an established and widely accepted theoretical framework for the decision making of ethical consumers has yet to be developed (Fukukawa, 2003). To date, the theoretical frameworks most frequently applied and modified to understand the purchase decision-making processes of the ethically minded are those of "reasoned action" (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975) and "planned behavior" (Ajzen, 1991; De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007). Because the theory of reasoned action cannot account for behaviors without volitional control, Ajzen (1991) proposed the theory of planned behavior (TPB), arguing that behavioral intention will be expressed only in behavior under volitional control. Next, through modifications to the TPB, scholars in the ethical consumerism field have sought to include the influence of ethics, morals and values in this attitude-intention-behavior framework. For example, Shaw and Clarke (1999) developed theoretical models that include the influence of internal ethics (personal values) on intentions within the context of fair trade; Arvola et al. (2008) included moral norms to predict purchasing intentions for organic food; and Vermeir and Verbeke (2008) integrated the role of personal values into the intention to purchase sustainable food. These studies have tended to accept the theoretical assumption that an individual's intentions will directly determine their actual behavior (Fukukawa, 2003). This assumption, however, has been widely criticized as an oversimplification of the complex transition from intentions to action (Bagozzi, 2000; Morwitz et al., 2007).

In essence, it has taken a long time for scholars to learn that intention is an a poor predictor of behavior and that observing this discrepancy is of great importance for explaining, predicting and influencing consumer behavior (Bagozzi, 1993). Until now, particularly in studies of ethical consumerism, there have been insufficient analysis of this gap between ethical buying intentions and actions (Belk et al., 2005; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Auger and Devinney (2007) believe that to accurately investigate a consumer's ethical purchase intentions, one must simultaneously interrogate both personal characteristics and the consumption environment. For instance, some scholars note that the distortion of consumers' ethical purchasing intention is due not only to consumers' attempts to adhere to social expectations (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Carrington and Attalla, 2001), but also to incorrect evaluation of the specific future consumption environment (Carrington et al., 2010). In the transformation of intention to

actual behavior, individuals will interact with the current consumption environment, which influences their ethical decision-making processes (Phillips, 1993).

Some scholars have also explored the attitude-intention-behavior gap in consumers' decision-making process when building marketing decision-making models. For example, Ferrell and Gresham (1985) proposed a contingency model that emphasizes that ethical decision-making processes start from a social or cultural environment that generates ethical problems; when faced with an ethical problem, an individual's decision making is affected by personal factors (knowledge, values and attitudes) and important relationships (differential contact and role definition) as well as opportunities. Trevino (1986) proposed an integrated person-situation model, which argued that both personal factors (such as ego strength, locus of control, etc.) and situational factors (such as immediate working background, organizational culture and the nature of the work) moderate the relationship between cognitive appraisal and behavior; moreover, situational factors also have a direct impact on cognitive appraisal. Furthermore, Ferrell and Gresham (1985) find that ethical judgment can directly influence ethical behavior, and the factors that influence ethical decision making contain important relationships, personal factors, situational factors and opportunities. However, although the scholars mentioned above note the effect of a consumer's individual characteristics and specific consumption situation when investigating the factors influencing individual ethical decision making, much of this research has focused primarily on the seller side of the buyer-seller dyad, and relatively few studies have examined ethical issues in the marketplace from the perspective of consumer ethics (Vitell, 2003). To examine the purchase decision-making mechanisms of ethical consumption, particularly the deep factors that influence the ethical purchase intention-behavior gap, this paper will include two methods and by referring to the aforementioned decision-making models from ethical marketing, integrate the two perspectives of personal consumer and environmental shopping levels. We therefore focus not only on the influence of individual characteristics on the purchase intention-behavior gap but also on the influence of the specific purchasing situations on the ethical purchase decision-making process. The qualitative study at the initial stage interrogates the factors of influence that lead to the intention-behavior gap through in-depth interviews; then, through a quantitative study using a large-scale questionnaire survey at the second stage, the paper further tests the identified factors from the initial stage and investigates the moderating effect of each factor on the relationship between intention and behavior.

Qualitative study

Social desirability bias and data collection

Because the investigation of ethics-related topics is subject to social desirability bias, great care must be taken when collecting data (Brunk, 2010; Oberseder et al., 2011). To reduce this bias we took the following measures. First, face-to-face interviews were conducted, as they are seen as a good approach for minimizing self-presentational concerns (Wooten and Reed II, 2000); reducing the pressure on interviewees to "do and say the right thing" (Bristol and Fern, 2003). Second, we tried as much as possible to make the interviewees feel comfortable. Third, before the interview, the respondents were advised that the focus of the research was to investigate their opinions and beliefs and that there were no right and wrong answers to the interview questions. Lastly, for some particularly delicate questions, a projective technique was used, and we asked our respondents to interpret the behavior of other consumers (Fischer and Fick, 1993).

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