

An Examination of the Volitional Stages in Consumer Decisions to Avoid Sweatshop Clothing

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Abstract

While much research in ethical consumption has focused on contexts such as food, this research explores ethical consumer decision-making in the context of intention to avoid sweatshop clothing where consumer concern has increased but response from the market remains limited. This research seeks to deepen the theory of planned behaviour with respect to the volitional stages underlying behaviour. The findings of the research support a modified theory of planned behaviour model and also reveal volitional stages from intention to trying and plan which reveal the stages of consumer decision-making to avoid sweatshop clothing. Implications for consumer decision-making are discussed.

Keywords: Volition, Decision-making, Ethics, Clothing.

Track: Social Responsibility, Ethics and Consumer Protection

1. Introduction

There has been increased media attention (e.g. Hickman, 2004), activism (www.nosweat.org.uk/) and heightened consumer concern about the production of clothing which uses sweatshop labour. Ethically concerned consumers may feel overwhelmed by limited labelling and information, perceived lack of availability and choice, and where ethical alternatives are available they may be viewed as unfashionable and/or over-priced (e.g., Shaw & Duff, 2002; Tomolillo & Shaw, 2003). The difficulty in implementing ethical consumption intentions in this context means that the process of avoiding sweatshop clothing can be quite involving in terms of decision-making. This research uses the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) to increase our understanding of the variables impacting intention to avoid sweatshop clothing. The research will empirically examine the TPB framework with a view to gaining an improved understanding of the volitional stages underlying behaviour in this ethical context. This is critical both to the deepening of this model and to the development of a clearer understanding of decision-making in this context.

Fishbein & Ajzen's (1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) theory of reasoned action (TRA), and its extended version, TPB (Ajzen, 1991), mainly contend that people behave rationally following their beliefs, attitudes and intentions (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Despite the model's success in a range of behavioural contexts (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), in some contexts its prediction and explanatory ability remains limited. This has led many researchers to both broaden and deepen the model (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001; Bagozzi, 1992). Particularly relevant in the context of ethical consumption is the inclusion of measures of ethical obligation and self-identity (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Shaw, Shiu & Clarke, 2000; Shaw & Shiu, 2003; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). Ethical consumers' decision-making processes are often driven by moral concerns and a sense obligation to others (Shaw & Clarke, 1999), hence the importance of broadening the model to include these constructs.

With regards to deepening the TPB, several models have been developed including the model of goal-directed behaviour (MGB and its extended (EMGB) (Perugini & Bagozzi, 2001; Perugini & Conner, 2000), these models have not been as empirically validated as the TPB and arguably in the current context goals may prove problematic to define. Importantly these developments highlight the lack of attention in the TPB to the volitional processes of which behavioural intentions are a part. The TPB has been criticised for not conceding enough importance to what having an intention actually means (Perugini & Conner, 2000) and for being too narrow to encompass both an action plan and the channelling of motivation to act (Perugini & Conner, 2000; Bagozzi, 1992; 1993). Perugini & Conner (2000) consider three aspects of volition: 1. an individual's direct statement of their intention 2. plan 3. commitment and effort to engage in the behaviour. However, several observations must be made about Perugini & Conner's (2000) volition components. Firstly, with regards to 'plan', Perugini & Conner (2000) have followed Bagozzi's (1993, p.226) concept of plan as cognitive effort: "plans/mental effort refer to the operational intentions one forms with respect to the means chosen in pursuit of a goal. This is to be differentiated from the intention to try to pursue a goal which generally forms before consideration of means". Thus, plan is reflective of *actual* effort/steps expended to undertake the behaviour. Secondly, Bagozzi (1992) argues that effort is a key determinant of action and is articulated as 'trying'. The authors accept this definition as reflective of *anticipated* effort expended to enact the behaviour. Indeed, this articulation of trying reflects the "effort" questions of Perugini & Connor (2000). Although earlier work has highlighted these different aspects of volition as distinct from intention, it does not give recognition to the individual merits of these volitional stages and, as proposed by the current authors of this paper, their sequential nature. It is

hypothesised that ‘intention’ is followed by ‘trying’, a cognitive measure of an individual’s anticipated effect to avoid sweatshop clothing and this is followed by ‘plan’ a measure more reflective of *actual* effort expended to enact the behaviour. The inclusion of these volitional components is considered important in our model given the potential barriers to behaviour in this context. Specifically, therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- to explore the contribution of ethical obligation and self-identity in the explanation of intention to avoid sweatshop clothing within the TPB.
- to examine the motivational constructs of volition, namely intention, trying and plan as mediating decisions to avoid sweatshop clothing.

2. Methodology

To address the research aims it was essential to access a sample of consumers with a strong ethical stance who were likely to take steps to avoid purchasing sweatshop produced clothing. Thus, a questionnaire was sent to a purposive sample of subscribers to the UK magazine ‘Ethical Consumer’ resulting in 794 complete and useable responses. TPB measures, including intention, were obtained as recommended by Ajzen (1985), ethical obligation (Sparks et al., 1995) and self-identity (Sparks & Shepherd, 1992). Trying followed Bagozzi (1992), plan was based on Perugini & Conner (2000). The items underlying each of these constructs are given in the appendix. Analysis is conducted using structural equation modelling (SEM) via Amos 5.0 (Arbuckle, 2003).

3. Results

3.1. Subjects.

Of the 794 respondents, 33% are male and 67% female. Only 4% are under 25 years of age, with 26% between 25-34, 30% between 35-44, 21% between 45-54, and 19% aged 55 or over. 25% of these respondents are single, 66% married or living with a partner and the remaining 9% separated, divorced or widowed. In terms of past behaviour, respondents were asked “Of the clothing you purchased in the last twelve months, to what extent have your choices been guided by your concerns about avoiding sweatshop clothing?” Responses ranged from “0” (not at all) to “6” (totally), with 14% indicating responses of 0-1, 57% between 2-4 and 29% indicating 5-6.

3.2. Constructs.

The mean, standard deviation and Cronbach alpha for each construct are given in Table 1. The results show that respondents have a very positive attitude towards avoiding purchasing of sweatshop clothing, perceive moderately high peer/social pressure, perceive moderate difficulties in engaging in the behaviour, indicated strong ethical obligations and high level of self identification with the issues. Overall, intention is strong, with much stronger indication of trying to engage with the behaviour, but lower level of planning to undertake the behaviour. The items within each construct display good to adequate internal reliability as indicated by the Cronbach alpha values, with a minor reservation concerning the two items underlying SN.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Cronbach alpha

	N of items	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach alpha
Intention	3	0 to 6	4.38	1.40	.905
Attitude	4	-3 to + 3	2.64	.72	.915
Subjective norm	2	-3 to + 3	1.05	1.20	.606
Perceived behavioural control	3	-3 to + 3	-.83	1.76	.920
Ethical obligation	3	-3 to + 3	2.39	.75	.819
Self-identity	3	-3 to + 3	2.23	.75	.762
Trying	2	0 to 6	5.14	1.26	.921
Plan	2	0 to 6	3.78	1.85	.928

3.3. SEM analysis.

The hypothesised model (see Figure 1) performed well, with fit statistics ($\chi^2 = 473.798$, $p = .000$; $\chi^2/df = 2.534$, $GFI = .948$, $CFI = .976$, $TLI = .970$, $RMSEA = .044$ and $AIC = 605.798$) showing overall good fit between the specified model and the data. Furthermore, the R^2 values for the three constructs are all at acceptable levels, with the lowest ($R^2 = .47$ for intention) in line with that reported in Conner & Armitage (1998).

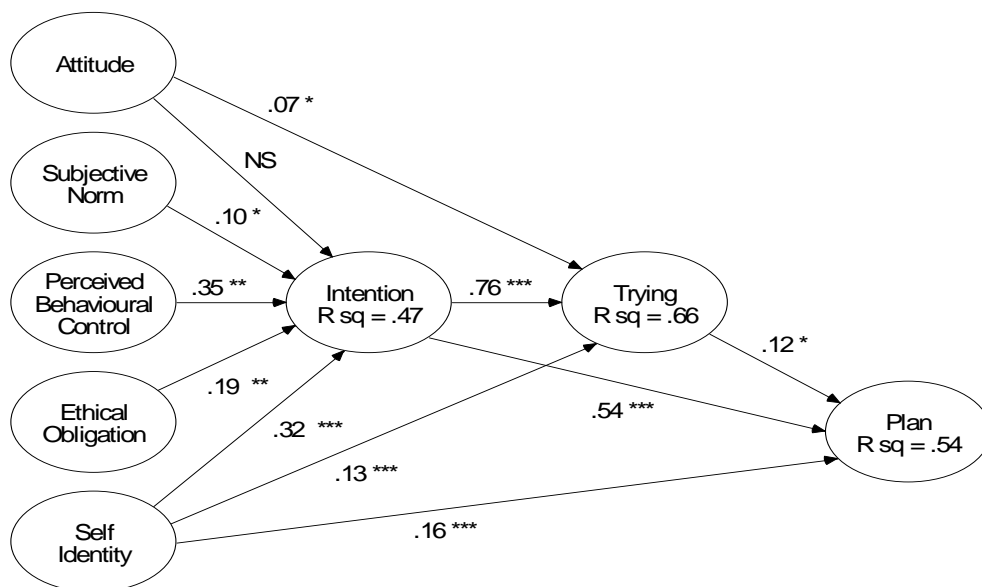


Figure 1. SEM Model and Results (standardised regression coefficients and R^2 values)

The expected impact of attitude on intention is not significant. The effects of attitude and self-identity are not fully mediated by intention, with attitude having a significant direct impact on trying and self-identity having a direct impact on both trying and plan. The construct of trying is well captured and explained mainly by intention, followed by self-identity and moderately by attitude. Plan is adequately captured and explained mainly by intention, followed by self identity and trying. Intention is thus the key determinant of both trying and plan. Interestingly and uniquely, self-identity makes a sizeable contribution towards all three dependent (endogenous) constructs.

Finally, the 5 independent (exogenous) constructs exhibit discriminant validity as demonstrated by their correlation values given in Table 2. The association between ethical obligation and self-identity is strongest, but with $r^2 = (.64^2) = .40$ indicating that only 40% communality is shared between these two constructs.

Table 2. Correlations between exogenous constructs

	Subjective norm	Perceived behavioural control	Ethical obligation	Self-identity
Attitude	.18 ***	.00 (ns)	.49 ***	.31 ***
Subjective norm		.26 ***	.33 ***	.26 ***
Perceived behavioural control			.18 ***	.23 ***
Ethical obligation				.64 ***

*** = significant at 0.001 level; ns = not significant at 0.05 level

4. Discussion

The pertinence of perceived behavioural control confirms the difficulties posed for consumers in avoiding sweatshop clothing. Also important was the significant independent effect of both ethical obligation and self-identity. The necessary addition of the former to the current study is hardly surprising given the ‘ethical’ context of the study, where the behaviour is centred around a concern for others. In the instance of self-identity, as an ethical issue(s) becomes important to an individual it becomes part of their self-identity, and they form a desire to behave accordingly. Additionally, the strong impact of perceived behavioural control suggests the existence of obstacles in decision-making for which one would arguably require some self-identity with the issue in order to aspire to overcome such difficulties. Although research has used both these variables in the same model (e.g., Sparks, Shepherd & Frewer 1995; Shaw, Shiu & Clarke, 2000; Shaw & Shiu, 2003), such applications have not been widespread. The findings in the present study clearly demonstrate the conceptual and empirical importance of both measures to the enhancement of TPB in this behavioural context. The reduced role of subjective norm as found in this study has been suggested and discussed elsewhere (e.g., Shaw, Shiu & Clarke, 2000). Vallerand et al. (1992), for example, suggest that subjective norm is less pertinent in the prediction of intention because this measure is concerned with a more remote concept, that is what important others think, an issue which may be particularly relevant in this behavioural context where research has found that individuals are often isolated in their ethical concerns (Shaw & Clarke 1999). Indeed, Sparks, Shepherd & Frewer’s (1995) study examining expectations of eating food produced by gene technology, another area of ethical concern, also found that in a model where measures of ethical obligation and self-identity are included in the TPB structure, “others’ attitudes” makes a non-significant contribution to the prediction of intention. The modified TPB structure in the present study also revealed a reduced contribution of attitude. This finding coupled with that for subjective norm clearly reveal that in this behavioural context the variables contained within the traditional TRA model are not as central to the decision-making process as the additional measures of perceived behavioural control, ethical obligation and self-identity, arguably because the TRA variables are more suited to the prediction of self-interested behaviours.

The examination of volitions as a sequential process in decision-making is novel. The sequence of intention-trying-plan within a modified TPB structure is supported by the findings of this study. That is, in addition to the pertinent role of intention within the modified TPB, intention also makes a significant additional impact on trying and plan. Bagozzi (1993) supports the view that volition refers to motivational and cognitive processes that follow an overall plan to pursue an action (in other words, the processes that succeed intention). This is in keeping with the findings of this study that found intention, trying and plan to follow a sequence as stages of volition. Thus, ethical consumers must have a significant level of motivation, as revealed in this study through perceived behavioural control, ethical obligation and self-identity, which culminates in the formation of an intention to avoid sweatshop

clothing. Once intention is formed attention can be turned to trying and plan. In terms of trying, it is recognised that avoiding sweatshop clothing can move decision-making from low to higher involvement, due to barriers such as lack of availability, information and labelling in this behavioural context, therefore, resulting in more effort on the part of the consumer to avoid purchases which involve sweatshop production. Thus, trying plays an important role as ethical alternatives in clothing do not enjoy mainstream availability. Plan is important in terms of considering the requirements in actually implementing purchases which are sweatshop free. This is critical in converting intention formation into actual behavioural performance. Such improved clarity of the stages of volition can aid our understanding of the attitude-behaviour gap as intention-trying-plan can be conceived as the motivational steps towards behavioural outcome.

Interesting within the stages of volition is the significant contribution of self-identity at each stage. Ethical consumption issues are central to individuals' sense of identity as ethical consumers (e.g., Shaw, Shiu & Clarke, 2000; Shaw & Shiu, 2003). Avoiding sweatshop clothing requires substantial deliberation and effort on the part of the consumer. In this way ethical consumption behaviours are more connected to an individuals' sense of self and, thus, impact independently on each motivational construct within volition. Nuttin (1987) argues that in so far as an act is evaluated as acceptable within the context of the self-concept, the motivated act becomes an individual's will. When we integrate motivation "into the self-evaluating activity of an individual and his self-concept, motivation becomes personalized: Volition transforms behaviour into personalized action. As a result, it profoundly affects the dynamic impact of a motive, since the deeper layers of personality dynamics are added to the subject's motivation for a specific goal-object" (Nuttin 1987, p.317-318).

The success of ethical production alternatives in food, such as fair trade coffee, lends much of its achievement to the development of a quality product available in mainstream outlets. Thus, just as ethical food products must satisfy a desire for ethics alongside quality, taste and availability, ethical clothing must fulfill consumer desire for clothing which has not been produced under sweatshop conditions (Shaw et al., 2006). This highlights the pertinence of intention setting, trying and plan in terms of avoiding sweatshop clothing. This suggests that current ethical retailers must more fully consider ways in which to access the market more fully, such as through concessions in mainstream outlets (fair trade and eco company People Tree are an example of this). In terms of existing high street retailers, inherently having the dimension of availability resolved, they must more fully address the ethical concerns surrounding their products, particularly in terms of production and labelling. Codes of conduct as they currently stand are not sufficient to convince ethically concerned consumers of the merits of clothing products. Further, codes of conduct are not available at point of purchase, and, as such cannot be viewed as a substitute for clear informative labeling regarding conditions of production. The need for labelling in this area has been highlighted by Dickson (2001), who explored consumer reaction to a 'no sweat label' designed for clothing. This will be pertinent to ensuring that ethical clothing does not become just another 'niche' market, enabling companies to work towards labelling certification for products. This appears to be central to the demands made by ethically concerned consumers in previous and the current research. The current research reveals that within the constraints of avoiding sweatshop clothing currently ethical consumers reveal a strong intention to avoid sweatshop clothing, coupled with a strong identification with ethical issues which moves the consumer beyond intention to trying and an action orientated stage of plan. This clarification of volitional stages anchored within a modified TPB affords an improved understanding of decision-making in this context.

Appendix: constructs and questionnaire items

Intention	How likely are you to avoid purchasing an item of sweatshop clothing the next time you shop for clothing?
	How strong is your intention to avoid purchasing an item of sweatshop clothing the next time you shop for clothing?
	How much do you agree with this statement about you “I will avoid purchasing an item of sweatshop clothing the next time I shop for clothing”?
Attitude	Overall, I think that my avoiding purchasing sweatshop clothing would be
	Good - Bad
	Positive - Negative
	Beneficial - Harmful
	Favourable - Unfavourable
Subjective Norm	People that are important to me would think I ‘should’/‘should not’ avoid purchasing sweatshop clothing
	People who are important to me would ‘approve’/‘disapprove’ of my avoiding purchasing sweatshop clothing
Perceived Behavioural Control	If I wanted to I could easily avoid purchasing sweatshop clothing from now on
	There are likely to be little to no barriers for me in avoiding purchasing sweatshop clothing
	Avoiding purchasing sweatshop clothing is ‘Easy’ – ‘Difficult’
Ethical Obligation	I feel that I have an ethical obligation to avoid purchasing sweatshop clothing.
	My conscience would dictate that I should avoid purchasing sweatshop clothing.
	I feel that it would be morally right for me to avoid purchasing sweatshop clothing.
Self Identity	I think of myself as someone who is concerned about ethical issues.
	I think of myself as an ethical consumer.
	I’m someone more orientated towards purchasing clothing which are ethical in nature.
Trying	I aim to avoid sweatshop clothing
	I will try to avoid sweatshop clothing
Plan	I have made plans to avoid sweatshop clothing
	I have taken steps to enable me to avoid sweatshop clothing

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