

# The Myth of the Ethical Consumer: A Critical Analysis for Ethical Consumerism

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## Abstract

Consumption engages people every day. Literature suggests that consumers seek out products that satisfy their needs, at the lowest possible cost. However, some consumers appear to be selecting products, sometimes at higher costs, because they are not causing harm to their body or the environment, or because producers are receiving fair price for their goods, or because they are grown or made locally. However, despite embracing the values of ethical consumers' choices upon the environment, animals and the society, literature proves that, this does not automatically turn into purchaser buying behaviour. This is a big concern for companies because they are increasingly finding that there exists a gap between what ethical consumer's say they are going to do and what they actually do at the point of purchase. This paper reviews literature on ethical buying behaviour and proposes a model of how the formative stage and the decision making stage interplay to form the ethical buying behaviour in the presence of motive (i.e., feel good & do good), personal variables (i.e. individualistic, involved & empowered, independent, informed), and intervening variables (i.e. inhibiting & influencing/facilitating variables). The proposed holistic conceptual model addresses significant limitations within the ethical consumerism literature, and brings light to the understanding of ethical consumer behaviour; particularly the intention– behaviour gap. The study gives necessarily ideas and tactical direction for businesses managers and marketing managers with an endeavour to close the intention– behaviour gap of the ethical consumers.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Ethical consumerism, Ethical products

## I. Introduction

Rising ethical concerns, its increasing prominence in media, emergence of

organized consumer activist groups and increased availability of ethical products have improved consumer awareness about

the significance of their ethical buying behaviour. There are several forms of ethical consumer behaviour. There are those promoting the natural environment (e.g. environmentally friendly products, animal well-being), while others do good to people (e.g. products free from child labor), some may advantage people or the environment close to home (e.g. organic food), or conversely in a faraway part of the world (e.g. fair-trade products). Consumers can transform their ethical concerns by means of buying products for their positive qualities (e.g. green products) or by boycotting products for their negative qualities (e.g. not buying products made by children) (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005).

Researchers have sought to understand this social change by developing models of ethical consumer behaviour. Research attests, however, that while rising numbers of consumers have engaged and are stimulated by the values of ethical consumerism, a change in consumption behaviour is much less visible. Stated ethical intentions hardly ever turn into actual ethical buying behaviour (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Shaw et al., 2007). This state has profound implications for the marketers of ethical products, as product launches based on intentions to purchase are more than expected to result in costly failures. Understanding the gap between

what consumers plan to do and what they actually do at the point of purchase of ethical products and understanding how to close this gap, is undoubtedly an important academic, managerial and social goal (Carrington et al., 2010).

The present study starts with a review of existing literature on ethical consumer behaviour with the objective to provide a critical examination of the literature on the ethical consumers' intention– behaviour gap; and to establish a model as an appropriate method for understanding and closing this gap. By understanding the ethical purchase behaviour, organisations can establish adequate sustainable marketing strategies. Businesses think that adopting greener strategies creates high expenses (Van der Zee, 2008) and they necessitate comprehending the impact this has on their clients to avoid taking unnecessary risk. The findings of such a study will assist businesses to understand the ethical purchasing behaviour of consumers and therefore develop an appropriate strategy and practical marketing outline to ensure success. Along with the significance to the business organizations, the present study will enrich the existing literatures and theories of ethical consumer behaviour. Then it suggests a holistic interconnection of various factors of the formative stage and

decision making stage for future research directions to understand ethical consumers actually do at the point of purchase, and understanding how to close this gap prevalent in consumer behaviour literature and marketing field in general.

## **II. Review of Literature**

This section of the paper attempts to review the existing literatures to understand ethical consumers, attitude behaviour gap of ethical consumers, the theories used in ethical consumerism and empirical evidences on consumer's ethical buying behaviour.

### **(i) The Ethical Consumers**

Mounting ethical concerns viz. human ethical concerns, animal ethical concerns and environmental concerns (Wheale and Hinton, 2007), the rising prominence of these concerns within mainstream media, the coming out of organised consumer activist groups and the increasing availability of ethical products, all have shown the way to better consumer understanding in relation to the impact of their buying and use behaviour (Connolly and Shaw, 2006). The term 'ethical consumer' was used to describe those consumers, who considered environmental issues, animal issues and ethical issues, including oppressive regimes and armaments, when shopping (Mintel, 1994).

Moreover, this term is now commonly used referring to such a consumer group. It is to note that Ethical consumerism infers to consumer choices based on the social, non-traditional components of products (Auger et al., 2003) as well as personal and moral beliefs (Carrigan et al., 2004), with responsibility to the environment, society; and fight for expressing their values through boycotting behaviour (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Examples of ethical concerns include environmental/green issues, sustainability concerns, workers' rights, country of origin, arms trade, fair trade and animal welfare. 'Green' consumerism, it should be noted, is subsumed within the wider category of ethical consumerism (Carrington et al., 2010).

From 'green' beer (a carbon neutral beer) and hybrid car technology to 'Fair Trade'-endorsed tea and chocolate, marketing strategies targeted at the ethically minded are widely being adopted to knock into potentially money-making market segments and to promote the ethically responsible and environmentally etiquette (Carrington et al., 2010), though research developing a deep understanding of the ethical consumer is limited (Shaw et al., 2005).

### **(ii) Attitude- Behaviour Gap of Ethical Consumers**

A number of studies reported Ethical consumers' behaviour to be more complex and heterogeneous than may at first be apparent (Low and Davenport, 2007); *the complexity of ethical consumer choices reflects the intricate process of ethical decision making*. Companies are increasingly realising that there exists a gap between what consumers say they are going to do and what they actually do at the point of purchase (Shaw et al., 2007). This is what researchers refer to as attitude-behaviour or word-deed gap (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001, and De Pelsmacker et al., 2005); a gap that is poorly understood, especially within the ethical consumerism context (Shaw and Connolly, 2006, Auger et al., 2003). The situation observed as the disparity between the attitudes, intentions and buying behaviours of ethically minded consumers. This gave room to two contrasting research perspectives within the ethical consumerism literature (Newholm and Shaw, 2007). One side is concerned with the limitations of the self-reported survey methodological approaches commonly used to assess consumers' ethical purchase intentions and consequent behaviour (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). These authors suggest that in research considering ethical issues, attitudes and intentions, people respond with answers they believe to be socially acceptable, overstating their ethical etiquette (De

Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Follows and Jobber, 2000). A second side believe in influencing factors that directly and indirectly shape the translation of ethical attitudes into ethical purchase intentions and actual behaviour (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007).

Moreover, Carrington et al. (2010) contended that social desirability and flawed research methodologies only partially explain the gap between intention and behaviour of the ethically minded. Those involved in discourse regarding their ethical intentions are not only influenced by social desirability (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), but will also almost undoubtedly be subjective in their predictions of their future shopping context. For example, they may arrive at the shopping location where ethical products may not be available at that time, or a competing 'unethical' product may be heavily discounted or be promoted in a more attractive manner, and so on (Carrington et al., 2010).

### **(iii) Theories of Ethical Consumerism**

Within the field of ethical consumerism, theory development is in its early stages (Fukukawa, 2003). *Attempting to understand the purchase decision-making processes of ethically minded consumers*, Researchers within this field take inferences on the well-known theoretical frameworks from the business ethics, social

psychology, and consumer behaviour, domains (Newholm and Shaw, 2007). These models are likely to have a genesis in cognitive approaches, focusing on the internal (mental) process of decision making (Fukukawa, 2003). built on a cognitive evolution: (1) beliefs determine attitudes, (2) attitudes direct to intentions and (3) intentions inform behaviour. In addition, social norms and behavioural control moderate intentions and behaviour (De Pelsmacker and Janssens, 2007, Mukandoli, D, & Baghat, D, 2017).

However, the theory of planned behaviour is a conceptual framework looking at the factors affecting the behaviour towards a particular issue, and has been modelled and applied to predict environmental aspect of behaviour such as water saving technology (Lynne et al., 1995), environmental attitude (Kaiser et al., 1999), and recycling (Shaw, 2008; Begum et al., 2009). The Theory of planned behaviour has also been extensively used in understanding ethical behaviour (Lynne et al., 1995; Taylor and Todd, 1995; Chang, 1998 and Sidique et al., 2010). Using this theoretical framework, there are two circumstances that may contribute to the overall disparity between attitude and behaviour – a gap.

#### **(iv) Empirical Evidences on Consumer's Ethical Buying Behaviour**

#### **(a) Knowledge on Ethical Issues and Attitude towards Ethical Products**

There are not many direct researches available that have used “knowledge on ethical issues” and its relation to consumer attitude towards ethical products, however, many researchers have attempted to see the relationship between knowledge on environmental issues and consumer's environmental attitude and behaviour. Indeed, the environmental knowledge and awareness has been reported as the precondition for the formation of attitude towards environment (Kaiser et al.,1999). Hines et al. (1987) in his study on meta-analysis of seventeen studies found correlation coefficient of 0.299 between knowledge and environmental behaviours. He concluded knowledge to be the most significant predictor of the environmental action. On the basis of a random sample of 2307 respondents from German population, Diekmann and Preisendörfer (2003) proved that knowledge and awareness about environment is correlated with attitude and behaviour towards environment. By using logistic regression on responses from construction contractors, Begum et al. (2009) provided a strong evidence of positive relationship between environmental awareness and attitude. Smith conducted case research of consumer

boycotts, a clearly identifiable form of ethical purchase behaviour. Campaigns of grape boycotting in California notify that consumers could readily connect grapes with their concerns towards bad treatment of grape farm workers (Smith, 1990). Labor abuses by Nike and the infant formula issue by Nestle are among the most cited examples of the ethical consumer behaviour (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Shaw and Clarke 1999). These campaigns could not have started without having knowledge on ethical issues. In view of the above discussion, it can be hypothesized that the knowledge on ethical issues has positive relationship with consumer attitude towards ethical products.

### **(b) Attitude and Purchase Intention for Ethical Products**

Attitude and Purchase Intention has been a subject of research, and remains a controversial issue. Attitude infers to a mental or neural state of readiness, structured through experience, exerting a command or active influence on the individual's reaction to all objects and situations (Allport, 1935). Thus, Attitude described as the degree of favourable or unfavourable evaluation of the behaviour under study and Intention act as cause-effect scenario. In this line of thought, a person willing to display a specific behaviour may undertake the cost benefit

analysis as a consequence of the action undertaken and favorable attitude is linked with positive evaluation of the action (Ajzen, 1991; Cheng et al., 2006). Hence, positive attitude towards a particular behaviour cements the intention to perform that behaviour. Under this discussion, it can be hypothesized that an attitude towards ethical products has positive relationship with the purchase intention for the products.

### **(c) Subjective Norm and Purchase Intention for Ethical Products**

Subjective Norm and Purchase Intention remains a good topic of research. The perceived social influences/pressures to indulge or not to indulge in a given behaviour which explains what Subjective norms is, suggests that individuals have a propensity to exhibit a behaviour that is admired by their reference groups, as they seek relationships and group associations (McClelland 1987; Ajzen, 1991; O'Neal, 2007). Subjects not only act upon behaviour under social pressure but the subjective norm also gives them information about the suitability of behaviour under consideration (Jager, 2000). Subjective norm has been extensively analyzed in the studies on environmentally responsible behaviour (Biel and Thøgersen, 2007). Based on these evidences, it can be hypothesized that



subjective norm has positive relationship with the purchase intention for ethical products.

#### **(d) Perceived Behavioural Control and Purchase Intention for Ethical Products**

Perceived behavioural control concerns with individuals' own judgment about their capabilities to take on or not a given behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). An individual's likelihood of disposition of behaviour depends on the extent of availability of linking resources and existence of prospects to behave in that manner (Ajzen, 1991). Individual's confidence in the ability to control, actual or perceived availability of the product have positive relationship with the purchase intention or the purchase behaviour, and the opposite to this could be a reason behind low degree of translation of intention of using into the actual usage behaviour (Padel and Foster, 2005; Krystallis and Chryssohoidis, 2005, Mukandoli, D & Baghat. D, 2018). In case of perceived abilities, majority of past studies have attributed income or financial resources as essential determinants of willingness to purchase organic food (Gracia and de Magistris, 2007, Mukandoli, D. & Baghat. D,2017). On the basis of the above studies, it can be hypothesized that perceived behavioural control has a significant positive effect on the purchase intention for ethical products.

#### **(e) Purchase Intention and Purchase Behaviour for Ethical Products**

The end of the game Intention-behaviour is observed in actual buying behaviour. Researchers have reported that behaviour can be determined from the intention with considerable accuracy (Ajzen, 1991). Many studies found out that, intention can be a strong predictor of behaviour, but in some cases, it may not be the case, which is referred to as intention - behaviour gap (Mukandoli, D. & Baghat. D,2018, Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980; Sheppard et al., 1988). In a study on the behaviour pertaining to the use of information technology, Venkatesh et al. (2003) reported a small to medium effect size of intention to use information technology on the actual behaviour. Researchers studying the buying behaviour for organic food have found significantly positive relationship between purchase intention and purchase behaviour (Saba and Messina, 2003; Thøgersen, 2007). In view of the discussion, it can be hypothesized that purchase intention is positively related to the purchase behaviour for ethical products.

#### **(v) Ethical Consumer Decision Making**

The disparities and relationships between attitudes and intentions of the ethically minded and ignored the gap between ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour has been researched on by

various researchers in the field of ethical consumerism (Carrington et al., 2010), where it was frequently reported that an individual's intentions will directly determine their actual behaviour (Fukukawa, 2003), an assumption regarded as an oversimplification of the complex transition from intentions to action (Bagozzi, 2000; Morwitz et al., 2007), since other literature highlight that purchase intentions do not translate literally into purchase behaviour (Morwitz et al., 2007; Young et al., 1998). This calls for a comprehensive study on understanding the intention of ethically minded consumers towards purchase of ethical products.

In this endeavour, Carrigan and Attalla (2001) reported that social desirability plays a significant role in consumers' ethical Intention–Behaviour gap. It is to highlight that ethical buying behaviour is important not simply as a form of consumer behaviour but in its implications. Beyond quality, price and availability ethical consumers have a strong motive; the ethical purchase behaviour targets the social control of business via the market. By exercising their consumer sovereignty, they plan to ensure social responsibility in business. However, this consumer power is an authority but also a sacrifice as far as they not only are concerned by their own personal

satisfaction but also buy with some consideration of the social and environmental well-being of others (Engel and Roger, 1981). The fact that ethical consumers are individualistic, involved & empowered, independent and informed makes it that they express concern about their consumption choices' impact. Something which is fair on people, fair on planet, made fairly, done fairly, produced locally strengthen the intention and orient the decision making of ethical consumers.

### **III. Proposed Model for Ethical Buyer Behaviour**

The above empirical evidences calls for comprehensive studies on understanding the intention–behaviour scenario. To bridge this gap, and provide future research directions, on the basis of above literature review, a model has been proposed which attempts to explain the buying behaviour of ethical consumers. With the help of six important factors, the model tries explain buying behaviour of ethical consumers. The factors are: personal characteristic of ethical consumers, their motives, formative stage, intervening factors, decision making stage and the feedback of ethical consumers. The personal characteristic of ethical consumers, their motives, formative stage, intervening factors in a sense strengthen the intentions which minimize the gap existing between intentions and actual purchase



behaviour. These factors are presented and explained below.

### **(i) Personal Factors**

The individualistic character of the ethical consumers can be considered as one of the important personal factors. In general, ethical consumers have individualistic belief with sense of responsibility which lead to exercise sovereignty and their sense of personal integrity (Shaw and Shiu, 2003). They do not hesitate to purchase products at higher costs if they are environment friendly as well as healthy. They also put importance to products that are grown locally or if it gives fair price to the producers (French and Rogers, 2007). Actually, they are looking for value, which basically means quality (Ederfield and Horton, 2001).

The second important personal factors is that the ethical consumers are involved and empowered while exercising their role as consumer and tend to boycott unethical products (Micheletti, 2003). Boycotts against Nestlé for selling baby formula in the developing world, against Coca-cola for mistreatment of workers in South America and Africa and boycotts against Nike for unfair labor practices in manufacturing plants examples of some the highly publicized boycotts (Micheletti 2003; Micheletti and Stolle, 2008).

The third characteristic which deserves mention is that ethical consumers try to be well informed and alert. The ethical consumers are active in searching information about products and brands. That is why information which does not recognise the behaviour of the target segment of individuals can result in negative feelings. Weatherell et al. (2003) find growing number of “concerned consumers” in the United Kingdom who purchase locally grown food, sometimes at higher costs, to participate in an alternative food system stressing environmental and social benefit

### **(ii) Ethical Consumers’ Motive**

Ethical consumers seek out products that satisfy their needs, their primary motive for consumption is to feel good and do good. American consumers for example, appear to be selecting items sometimes at higher costs, because they are grown locally, are not causing harm to the people, animals or environment (BBMG, 2007; French and Rogers, 2007). Information on corporate social responsibility is to influence ethical consumers’ purchase intentions strongly than price (Mohr & Web, 2005). Thus, beyond quality, price and availability ethical consumers have a strong motive; the ethical purchase behaviour targets the social control of business via the market. It is in this spirit that the ethical consumer will

think of reducing consumption, reusing and recycling products. In this endeavour, consumption is often viewed as an instrumental process for the satisfaction of material needs, so, consumer behaviour is shaped by larger societal concern (Barnet et al., 2005).

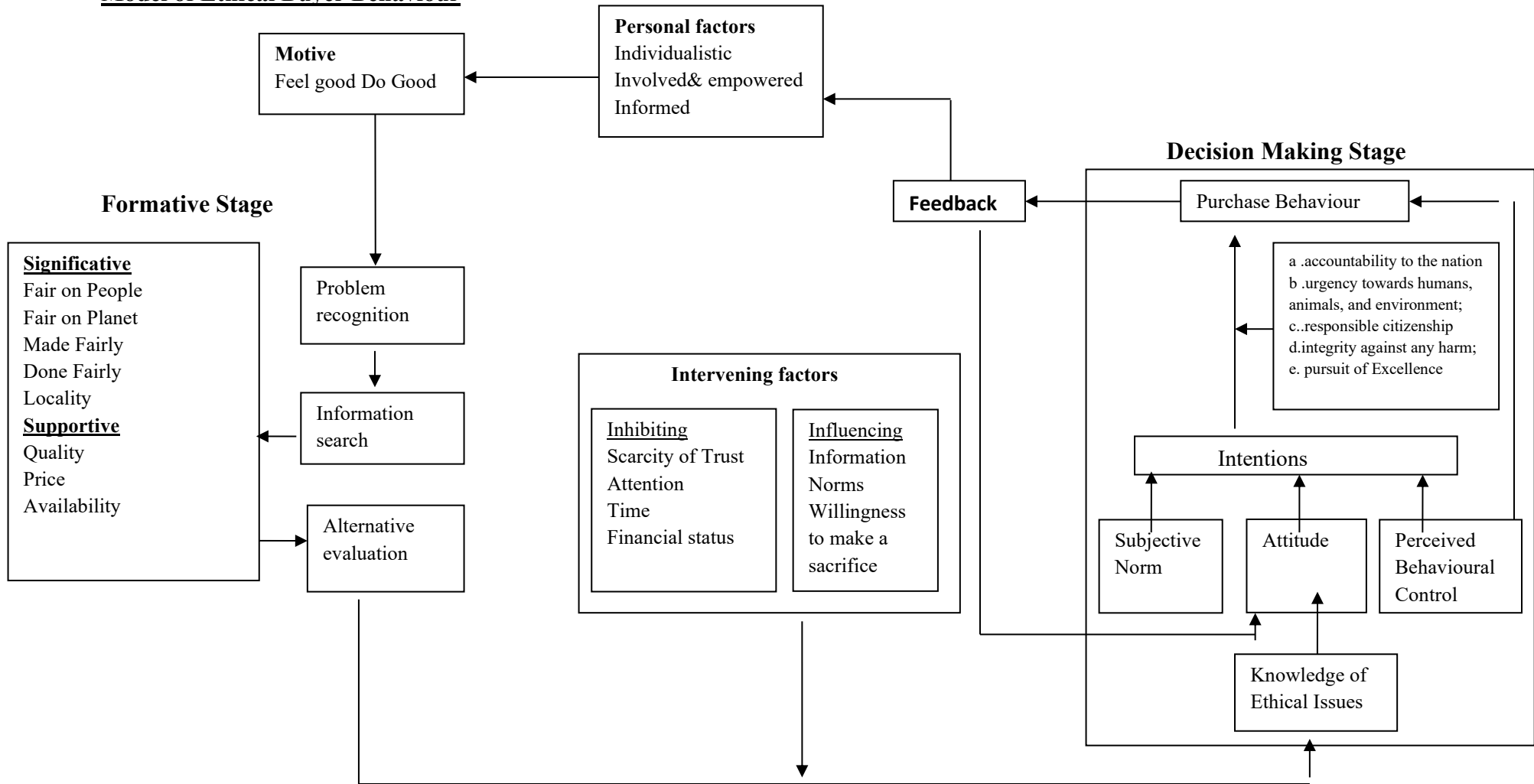
### **(iii) Intervening factors**

These factors are meaningful in their influence to the intentions and decision making as a whole; they come to alter or hinder the power of the influence of the formative stage to the decision making stage. It is clear that many factors can influence the individuals throughout the decision making process. However, by understanding ethical consumer behaviour, companies or business marketers can help consumers move through this process smoothly, as they can even influence the entire process, because it matters the most, and not just the purchasing decision, by assisting consumers if for some reasons they got stuck in their decision making.

### **(iv) Ethical consumer's Feedback**

It is argued that the potential power of consumers to influence environmental and social outcomes through their market choices appears a crucial process in providing a sustainable future for the earth inhabitants. By choosing products that they perceive as ethical and avoiding products seen as unethical, consumers will send a signal to the market as to what should or should not be produced. In addition to this they will have courage to boycott unethical companies. Boycotting is way ethical consumers try to send feedback by choosing and buying certain products and services over others due to social considerations (Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006; Shaw and Shiu 2002). It is also known as positive buying or affirmative buying (Harrison et al., 2005). An example of it is the purchase of fair trade or environmentally friendly products.

**Model of Ethical Buyer Behaviour**



**Fig. 1: Model of Ethical Consumer Behaviour**  
 {Note: Decision making stage is adapted from Ajzen, (1991)}

#### **IV. Bridging the Intentions- Behaviour Gap of Ethical Consumers**

The reviewed literature gave some insights on the journey of ethical consumers to form their purchase behaviour, but there is still need of comprehensive study on understanding the intention of ethically minded consumers towards purchase of ethical products. The proposed model in this paper pinpoints the interrelationship of various variables at different stages from personal variables to intervening variables (formative stage); and from knowledge of ethical issues to purchase behaviour (decision making stage). With the inclusion of Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) in the Decision Making Stage, it can be viewed that knowledge of ethical issues is always needed. This attitude, the subjective norms and perceived behaviour control will also positively influence the intentions towards ethical products. So, to close the gap existing between intentions and behaviour of ethical consumers, it is argued that the following variables strongly influence these new consumers-ethical consumers' intentions at the level to be translated into buying behaviour:

- a) Accountability to the nation
- b) Urgency towards humans, animals, and environment;
- c) Responsible citizenship

- d) Integrity against any harm;
- e) Pursuit of Excellence

#### **V. Future Research Directions**

The growing body of research in consumer behavior, ethical consumerism, psychology, and social psychology domains which report the attitude-behavior, intention-behaviour gap (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Elliot & Jankel-Elliot, 2003); which attempt to understand ethical purchase decision-making (Shaw, et al., 2007; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008), with a focus on the formation of ethical purchase intentions; ignores what weakens and/or stops the process. The reason why the ethical consumers' intention become weak at the time of purchase is still puzzling. Nevertheless, Chatzidakis et al. (2007) for example tried to explore the neutralization process that occurs in the supermarket as consumers who hold positive attitudes about Fair Trade products rationalize not buying them once they are in the store because of higher costs and a lack of belief that the Fair Trade system actually benefits poor producers. This study has provided important initial insights into the closing of ethical behaviour gap; but until empirically tested, these insights remain purely conceptual, while potential. Therefore, we anticipate and encourage research to challenge, strengthen and expand the integrated conceptual model proposed in

this article. A study focusing on significant new understandings of the role Intentions play in consumer decision-making in the context of ethical buying behaviour of ethical products would be an exciting avenue for future research. However, there exists a formative stage which is the basis and means to an end of the decision-making process. and the prioritization of ethical concerns; formation of plans/habits; willingness to commit and sacrifice; and modes of shopping behaviour directly affect ethical intention– behavior gap (Carrington, et al., 2012). With this in mind, it can also be hypothesized that having a sense of accountability to the nation; a sense of urgency towards humans, animals, and environment; having a sense of responsible citizenship; having a sense of integrity against any harm; and having a sense of pursuit of excellence will affect ethical intention–behaviour gap. This study took a qualitative approach with the aim of theoretical contribution. Using quantitative methods in further study would assist the exploration of mediating and moderating factors from formative stage and their influence to the intention and purchasing decision making behaviour as a whole. Further research is called for to validate and test the proposed relationships in some purchasing contexts.

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