

**Ethical Consumer Behaviour: Explaining Ethical Decision-Making in
Environmentally Responsible Consumption**

**Philosophical and Methodological Implications of a Modelling
Approach to Ethical Consumer Behaviour**

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ABSTRACT: My research proposal focuses on analysing ethical consumer behaviour developing a theory able to explain and predict ethical consumption in the case of the purchase of environmentally friendly products. This study will be developed within a realist ontology and a falsificationist epistemology. Following a deductive approach I plan to develop a theory based on existing literature and test it in the field. From a methodological perspective I suggest developing a quantitative study able to test the theory previously developed and verify its validity and reliability. The expected outcome is producing useful information for practitioners willing to develop sustainable consumption and advance our theoretical knowledge of what cause ethical consumption.

Keywords: *ethical consumption; sustainable consumption; realism; falsificationism; positivism; quantitative research; methodological fit.*

1. Introduction

In this paper I will outline my research proposal and focus on its philosophical and methodological implications. The document is divided in three different sections. In the first one I introduce the research topic, positioning it within the relevant literature and outlining the research question and the potential contribution to knowledge. In the second section I introduce the philosophical perspective and support my choice in relation to the relevant philosophical debates. The third section outlines the methodology. Finally I draw some conclusions on the strengths and weaknesses that I see as inherently part of my philosophical and methodological choices, so that it might serve as a reminder of potential challenges that I should be able to tackle during my studies.

2. The Research Proposal: Ethical Consumer Behaviour in the Environmental Domain

There has been increasing attention over the last twenty years on the social and environmental problems generated by current global patterns of economic development.

This debate proposed the idea of sustainable development as ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (UNWCED, 1987). One of the main implications of sustainable development is the necessity of changing the patterns of consumption especially in the developed world. Within the broader framework of sustainable development, sustainable consumption can identify a plurality of different behaviours. In particular, sustainable, ethical or socially conscious consumerism can refer to the purchase of products considered more ethical than other alternatives, the boycott of companies involved in unethical practices, post-consumption behaviours such as recycling and the reduction of consumption itself (Jackson, 2006; Newholm and Shaw, 2007).

Consumer researchers have so far failed to make a substantial contribution to the tackling of pressing problems related to sustainability (Mick, 2008). For this to happen, however, it is necessary that we develop theories of consumer behaviour able to explain ethical and altruistic purchases in contrast with the traditional marketing theory that is focused on self-interested consumption motives (Thøgersen, 1996). From this perspective the research question of my research would be: *What are the determinants of ethical consumer behavior?*

Consumer research in this area has produced largely inconclusive results (Cotte and Trudel, 2009). Some of the reasons for these unsatisfactory outcomes can be related to (Newholm and Shaw, 2007; Chan et al., 2008; Cotte and Trudel, 2009):

- the focus on many different behavioural domains without discriminating across behavioural instances (Webster, 1975);
- the excessive reliance on self-reported measures of ethical behaviour that are significantly affected by social desirability biases (Auger and Devinney, 2007);
- a superficial understanding of the philosophical assumptions of different definition of ethics and how this might translate into consumer behaviours (Caruana, 2007).

In my research I would attempt to develop a model of ethical consumer behaviour that is able to solve the three limitations identified above. First of all I would focus on the purchase of products that minimize their environmental impact, using the context of pro-environmental consumption as an example of ethical behaviour. Secondly I would

like to base my study on the observation of real purchase, trying to avoid social desirability biases. Finally I would use insights from other literature domains such as moral psychology and ethics to make sure that my theoretical model is coherent from the perspective of how ethical decision-making is represented and empirically tested. Merging together our current knowledge of socially conscious consumer behaviour with insights from other streams of research, I would develop a theoretical model able to explain pro-environmental consumer behaviour as a specific type of ethical behaviour. This theoretical model would be then tested in order to verify its explanatory and predictive ability.

The expected contribution of my research would be threefold:

1. Identify variables that in the specific case of analysis at least are able to influence observed behaviour, and therefore can be conclusively considered as explanatory determinants of ethical consumption;
2. Clarify some contextual variables that are at the foundations of the observed gap between attitudes and behaviour in ethical consumption (Auger and Devinney, 2007);
3. Increase our knowledge of how ethical principles are used by consumers in different observed patterns of behaviour (Chan et al., 2008).

This research proposal is based on some clear philosophical assumptions that are already visible in the language I used so far. In the next section I will clarify these assumptions describing why I think they offer a good perspective to analyze the topic of interest.

3. Philosophical Implications

3.1. Ontological Assumptions

The field of consumer research has had an extensive debate, especially in the 80s and 90s, on the philosophical bases of research. This debate was essentially centred on the differences between the dominant positivist paradigm and a more interpretive approach (Anderson, 1986; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Hunt, 1991). This differentiation parallels

the central differentiation in the social sciences between ontological and epistemological assumptions of positivism and social constructionism. (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008).

The realist perspective probably emerged as the dominant perspective within marketing as a whole and it is broadly based on the scientific realism that Hunt (1990: 9) defined as based on the following tenets: “(1) the world exists independently of its being perceived (classical realism), (2) the job of science is to develop genuine knowledge about that world, even though such knowledge will never be known with certainty (fallibilistic realism), and (3) all knowledge claims must be critically evaluated and tested to determine the extent to which they do, or do not, truly represent or correspond to that world (critical realism)”.

At the other extreme the social constructionist view criticises the realist tradition as deterministic and illusory because it tries to reify and objectify phenomena that, being part of the social world, are necessarily defined only by the shared meanings that people attach to them (Anderson, 1986; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). From this perspective the role of science itself is completely different because knowledge is intrinsically a social practice and what is true is what the community establishes as being true according to the dominant paradigm (Kuhn, 1962).

In my study I will adopt a realist perspective mainly for two reasons: 1) because it represents the assumption of reality that I believe as more coherent and that makes more sense to me, 2) because I think it matches the specific research interest and the goals of my PhD.

I personally believe in the existence of a reality external from researcher’s perception or at least I usually behave as if this assumption would be true. This means that, at least from a pragmatic perspective, I think that “to the extent that theories in consumer research incorporating latent constructs, such as “attitude,” “intentions,” and “beliefs” (intangible unobservables), have been successful in explaining, predicting, and solving pragmatic problems, such evidence provides warrant for believing that these psychological states of consumers exist independently or researchers’ labelling of them, that is, they are real” (Hunt, 1991, p. 35).

A realist ontology can nonetheless have limitations in the case of consumer research. Seminal studies that have focused on understanding consumers’ sense-making of consumption experiences (e.g. Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982 or Belk, 1988) would have

probably been unconceivable within a realist paradigm. This is not however what I want to achieve with my research. The focus of my study is explaining what makes consumers behave ethically; focusing on behaviour and trying to understand its antecedents. There is therefore a predictive element in this perspective that necessarily fits better with a realist conception of reality (Blaikie, 2007).

In terms of ontology, therefore, assumption that will inform my study can be summarised with the definition of *cautious realism* (Blaikie, 2007). The element of caution stems from the fact that we have to acknowledge our limitations in the perception of reality, and in particular we need to recognize that observing is an interpretive act driven by implicit or explicit theoretical expectations.

3.2. Epistemological Assumptions

From the reflection on the nature of reality that I have mentioned above stems a preference for a falsificationist epistemology. This approach, mainly developed by Karl Popper in his *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), despite sharing many similarities in terms of ontology with positivist approaches, it differentiates itself from traditional logical positivism on two grounds. The first one is that knowledge is never considered conclusive but always subjected to critique. We can always test our theories and empirically verify if they are false. In this perspective, in fact, we can never be certain that our theories are true and we can only be certain of eliminating those that are false. Science according to this perspective is based on a continuous process of trial and error. The second element is that knowledge is always guided by theory or at least by an 'horizon of expectations'. This epistemological approaches refuses the idea that we can perceive observations that are not mediated by some sort of theoretical framework. From this perspective the work of the scholar is developing theories and try to test them empirically. If the data gathered cannot demonstrate that the theory is false than this will be provisionally accepted.

Some commentators have considered this approach as excessively deterministic. However it is important to specify that what I would try to do is developing some probabilistic prediction related to my phenomenon of interest and not a complete causal explanation (Hunt, 1991).

Another element to point out is that this perspective sees the researcher as detached from the object of investigation. This approach is intrinsically linked to the fact that the phenomenon to study is external to the researcher and the theories developed have to be tested through the collection of 'objective' data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). It does not imply, however, that the choice of research is objective and impersonal. In fact, as I stated before, it actually assumes that we always analyse data with a background of theoretical expectations. What is objective in this perspective is the research method, because it is through the use of a certain method that we can be sure of critically scrutinizing our theories (Popper, 1959).

4. Methodological Choices

Although it is usually associated with statistical approaches and quantitative designs, the ontological and epistemological stance that I described so far, is coherent with both qualitative and quantitative methodology. In consumer research it is commonly more accepted pragmatically linking the aims of the research to the methodological choices rather than "canonize a qualitative-quantitative divide" (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, p. 870).

However, in my specific case a quantitative approach represents a better methodological fit in relation to the existing literature and the level of development of the field (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Ethical consumption, in fact, is an area that has been studied extensively with different methodological approaches. Equally very established is the study of altruism and pro-social behaviour and disciplines like philosophy and psychology. Conducting a qualitative study would therefore run the risk of discovering something that has been already analysed in the past therefore failing the opportunity of building on previous knowledge and advance our knowledge of this specific topic (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

According with these reflections, in the case of my PhD I would aim at developing a quantitative study with the possibility of surveying consumers attitudes and matching these data with a set of behavioural information. An example would be the possibility to conduct a survey of consumers whose purchases are recorded through a loyalty

programme. In this way I would be able to compare consumers beliefs about ethical consumption with their real behaviours.

Considering the philosophical considerations raised so far this design should be able to take into consideration (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008):

- **Internal validity:** although this is mainly an issue for experimental research, this type of design would have the ability of increasing internal validity in comparison with traditional surveys because I would be able to control for some of the variables able to influence consumers behaviours and therefore being more confident in the possibility of a link between the antecedents identified and the dependent variable. For example being able to track consumer purchases in the store I would be able to control the availability of certain products and the potential differences in price.
- **External validity:** in order to satisfy this aspect, and therefore being able to generalise the results obtained, I should be able to draw a random sample representative of the general population. Obviously generalisations are often very difficult because there are many contextual variables that play an important role. For example very crucial is the issue of self-selection of respondents: how do I know that the people who participated in the study do not significantly differ from the people who decided not to participate? A number of precautions can help in solving these problems. There are, for example, sampling techniques that can increase the representativeness of the results and self-selection biases can be limited through specific analyses.
- **Reliability:** this is another important element to analyse in quantitative studies specifically in relation to the scales used. Some techniques exist to assess the reliability of a scale and make sure that the measures would yield similar results if repeated in different occasions.

5. Conclusion

The research design that I am considering for my PhD research can be summarised as *deductive* based on a *cautious realist* ontology and a *falsificationist* epistemology (Popper, 1959; Blaikie, 2007). My choice, more than based on strong philosophical

views about nature of reality, is based on a personal conviction on what type of information I think would be more useful to academics and practitioners that are interested in increasing the relevance of ethical consumption in Western societies. I think that there is a gap in the knowledge and it can be filled with specific information on what are the individual variables that influence sustainable consumption. As part of the development of a more sustainable economy we need to engage consumers on an ethical level, trying to account for altruistic motivations in consumer behaviour. An important opportunity in this process would be using traditional social marketing tools with the objective of changing consumer behaviour in more sustainable directions. I think that a theory of ethical consumer behaviour, quantitatively tested on real consumer actions, would be able to provide more useful information than any other type of research design.

My research would therefore have the advantages of being easy to interpret and useful in justifying clear policy interventions. As potential weaknesses however it might suffer from excessive artificiality in data collection and be considered too mechanistic (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2008). In particular quantitative cross-sectional studies can become excessively reductive in their explanation of a certain problem (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2008). These limitations are reminders of possible challenges I should be able to address in my PhD.

Beyond this specific case, however, I believe in the necessity of adopting a pluralistic view on how to produce knowledge and I think that triangulation in consumer research is particularly advisable because it offers the opportunity of comparing different types of evidence, giving opportunity of falsifying and subsequently refining our theories (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). It is implicit in a pluralistic stance that every theoretical contribution should be evaluated according to the philosophical assumptions that are at its foundation (Anderson, 1986). Most importantly, however, every theoretical contribution should be judged according to its ability to influence management practice and offer useful insight on the phenomenon analysed.

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