CrossMark

"Beyond the Attitude-Behaviour Gap: Novel Perspectives in Consumer Ethics": Introduction to the Thematic Symposium

Robert Caruana · Michal J. Carrington · Andreas Chatzidakis

Research into the ethical, sustainable, green and socio-political aspects of consumption has grown considerably since the 1990s. As Belz and Peattie (2009) suggest, however, perhaps the most consistent finding within this burgeoning literature has been inconsistency between what people say (or express via attitudes, values etc.) and what they actually do—the so-called "attitude-behaviour" and "intention-behaviour" gaps (e.g., Bray et al. 2011; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2010; Chatzidakis et al. 2007; De Pelsmaker et al. 2005; Nicholls and Lee 2006). For instance, Young et al. (2010) observe that an estimated 30 % of consumers indicate concern about environmental issues, yet only 5 % translate this concern into action. Narrowing the gap between ethical consumption "attitudes/intentions" and actual consumption "behaviour" represents a challenge of practical and theoretical significance in light of the variety of top down and bottom up actors currently seeking to "mobilise the consumer" (Barnett et al. 2010) towards positive environmental and socio-economic outcomes.

Extant research on the ethical consumption "attitude-behaviour" gap broadly falls into two camps. First, there is a considerable amount of psychological and attitudinal research that focuses on methodological flaws, situational issues, and the addition of further constructs (see e.g., Luzar and Cosse 1998; Ogden 2003). Methodological issues include the overreliance on quantitative survey formats that encourage rational answers rather than delving into everyday hedonistic shopping responses, and the desire for respondents to provide socially desirable answers and appear to be 'good citizens' (e.g., Trudel and Cotte 2009; Auger and Devinney 2007). Context-specific issues include lack of finance, time or appropriate product/brand information (e.g., labelling/brand image) or reluctance to change convenient shopping patterns (e.g., Shaw and Clarke 1999; De Pelsmaker et al. 2005). Authors have also proposed the addition of further constructs such as "ethical obligation", "self-identity" (Shaw and Clarke 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu 2002a, b, 2003), and "commitment and sacrifice" (Carrington et al. 2014). Furthermore, a parallel line of research has examined potential variables that may increase the inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour rather than having an additional direct effect on behaviour (moderating variables). For instance, in the context of Fair Trade consumption, Chatzidakis et al. (2007) consider common before- or after-the-act justifications or "neutralisations" (Sykes and Matza 1957).

Concurrently, we observe that a second camp of 'interpretive' and cross-disciplinary research has entered the discussion on the back of such developments. This literature stream argues that the "attitude-behaviour gap" is a methodological construction of decision-making modelling studies that continue to assume that consumer behaviour is rational and stripped away from a broader social, historical and cultural context (Caruana 2007a, b). This field conceptualises ethical consumers as socially-connected beings that establish shared meaning systems and construct complex consumption identities (Carrington

R. Caruana
University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
e-mail: Caruana@nottingham.ac.uk

M. J. Carrington (✉)
University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia
e-mail: Michal.Carrington@unimelb.edu.au

A. Chatzidakis
Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, England
e-mail: Andreas.Chatzidakis@rhul.ac.uk

et al. 2012). Thus, the focus of interpretive studies has been to explore socio-cultural influences that have allowed various genres or types of "ethical" consumption to emerge and the many tensions that are created in people's daily lives over how to meet conflicting demands (Connolly and Prothero 2008). For instance, Autio et al. (2009) contend that "green consumerism" is a socially constructed concept, and that in everyday discourses and conversations there are many different translations of green consumerism and related identity constructions (e.g., "environmental hero" vs. "anarchist"). Other interpretive studies move away from the consumer as *individual* to more explicitly consider the *collective* (e.g., at household level; Belz and Peattie 2009) and community-based aspects of sustainable consumption. For example, Vaughan et al. (2007) argue that the consumption of refillable glass milk bottles can be linked with individual as well as collective identities that centre on feelings of community and nostalgia for Old England. Similar processes have been observed in a variety of new social movements such as "new consumption communities" (e.g., Bekin et al. 2005) and "spatially-embedded" forms of consumer activism (e.g., Chatzidakis et al. 2012), underlining increased acceptance of ethical consumption as a *multi-level,* rather than micro-individual phenomenon (Caruana and Chatzidakis 2013).

The extant research offers valuable insights into the lives of ethically-minded consumers, yet there remains considerable opportunity for cross-disciplinary and novel approaches that can promote radically different understandings of ethical consumption. This Journal of Business Ethics Thematic Symposium integrates a selection of peer-reviewed papers that were originally presented at the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility (ICCSR) 2012 Conference, 26th–27th April 2012. The aligned purpose of the JBE Symposium and the ICCSR Conference stream is to provide a forum for scholars to expand our conception of ethical consumer "words", "deeds", and consumption contradictions, and to move beyond a simple and relatively unreflective observation of "attitude-behaviour gaps". Combined as a coherent body of work, these four papers address the aims of the symposium by: (1) questioning the assumptions underpinning the extant literature; and/or (2) enriching our understanding of the well documented contradictory consumption (Szmigin et al. 2009) of ethically-minded consumers by introducing novel and cross-disciplinary approaches.

In the first paper, Hassan, Shaw and Shiu offer a theoretical and methodological extension of existing consumer ethics studies. It summarises the current state of knowledge within the attitudinal and socio-cognitive research tradition by providing a systematic review of all studies that have focused on the Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behaviour—the most established attitudinal models—and have explicitly measured intention-behaviour rather than attitude-intention correspondence. Interestingly the authors show that only a handful of studies observe actual behaviour (rather than past behaviour or measures of intention) and these are predominantly focused on ecological (e.g., recycling, energy conservation) rather than broader ethical concerns. Furthermore, the explanatory power of TRA and TRB in these studies varies significantly, from a mere R^2 of 0.0036 (Davies et al. 2002: $r = 0.06$) to 0.84 (Gill et al. 1986), with an approximate 50 % or more of the variation in behaviour not being explained by intention alone. The second part of Hassan et al.'s paper presents findings from a TPB-based study that incorporates measures of intention and behaviour whilst also examining the role of additional mediating and moderating constructs, such as implementation intentions (Carrington et al. 2010) and actual (vs. perceived) behavioural control. Altogether, Hassan et al.'s article points to a number of methodological and conceptual issues that "urge researchers to move beyond assessing intentions and to engage in research that would allow a more comprehensive assessment of the motivational pathway between words and deeds".

The second and third papers offer theoretical and empirical contributions, with both papers opening a new avenue of research by approaching ethics in consumption through the lens of "ethic of care" rather than abstract principles of moral and social justice that (implicitly) underlie virtually all ethical consumption research. Indeed, the relative negligence of care ethics in the ethical consumption literature is surprising given its increasing popularity in other disciplines (e.g., social psychology; Hollway 2007; business ethics; e.g., Simola 2012; Simola et al. 2012). Care scholars move away from enlightenment-based models of morality (highlighting for instance deontological versus teleological principles; e.g., Hunt and Vitell 1986) by counter-proposing a paradigm that explicitly acknowledges the gendered, relational and socio-cultural embeddedness of moral decisions. In this sense both papers represent a shift in the consumer ethics tradition that significantly challenges and promises to redefine "attitude-behaviour" gap debates. The current papers attempt the introduction of care ethics in two distinct yet interrelated ways. Heath, O'Malley, Heath and Story intertwine questions of care with family decision-making behaviour to recontextualize ethical choice amidst dominant social discourses on the family, and in doing so, re-couple 'individual' consumer ethics to social context and more embedded consumer behaviours. Similarly, Shaw, McMaster and Newholm suggest that, though employed in consumer ethics studies, the concept of care is rarely defined. They argue that 'care' is treated as one of a

number of variables (e.g., trust, reliability, quality etc.) and remains largely under-theorised in relation to consumer behaviour. Drawing on care theory, they confront the 'words–deeds gap' head on, exploring the interconnections between care and commitment to ethical behaviour; highlighting "variations in conceptualisations of care, interlinkages across conceptualisations and variation in intensity of care and impact on behaviour".

Finally, the fourth paper takes a radically different and refreshingly provocative approach to extant notions of ethical consumption and CSR. Bradshaw and Zwick contend that the field of Business Ethics—academic and practitioner—rests on a fundamental flaw: relying on capitalists and capitalism to save us from the devastating effects—environmental and social—of capitalism itself. They view this is an ethical stance of 'tragic beauty' and a refusal of Business Ethics and CSR to see the reality that 'sustainable growth' is an impossible notion. Thus, they ask, "why is it that our commitment to sustainable capitalism, green consumerism, and business sustainability prevails despite the compelling counter-arguments and despite the massive risk at stake?". Bradshaw and Zwick draw together strands of contemporary philosophy, critical theory and psychological inquiry, in particular Zizek and Freud, to address this central research question. In doing so, they move the ethical consumption intention-behaviour gap from the narrow context of consumers into the broad context of well meaning business ethics scholars, corporate leaders, and governments, as well as consumers. This paper poses a significant argument that suggests that in reality capitalism in any form—sustainable or otherwise—is diametrically opposed to the salvation of the global ecology, relying on the attitude-behaviour gap for its very survival. Thus, the field of Business Ethics and CSR could be unconsciously working towards the planets destruction, rather than salvation.

Individually, the four papers each offer their own distinct contribution. As a collection, the papers combine to address the aims of the symposium by taking a more multi-disciplinary, multi-modal understanding of ethics in consumption than the extant literature. In doing so, this thematic symposium undermines the simplicity of previous notions of the 'attitude-behaviour gap' to reveal the complex, socially embedded and contextual nature of ethics in consumption. The first paper reviews the attitudinal and psychologically-oriented studies currently dominant in ethical consumption research, with the aim of inspiring a new wave of research that employs more rigorous and complex methodological designs to advance a sophisticated understanding of the attitude–intention-behaviour relationship. The second and third papers argue the need to reconsider the "model of morality" assumed in current treatments, offering the ethic of care as an alternative lens.

While Shaw, McMaster, and Newholm problematise the current discourse of consumer ethics, Heath et al. offer an empirical intervention to reveal the complexity and multiplicity involved in ethical consumption choices. Finally, the fourth paper takes a multi-disciplinary approach to expose and problematise the ideological assumptions of the extant attitude-behaviour gap debate, and the academic disciplines and business practices within which this debate sits. We thank the authors of these papers for their commitment to the aims of this Thematic Symposium and their ongoing efforts to initiate fresh, complex, nuanced, and sophisticated understandings of ethical choices in consumption arenas. We also thank Thomas Maak, Journal of Business Ethics Special Issue Editor, for his continued support of this initiative.

References

Auger, P., & Devinney, T. M. (2007). Do what consumers say matter? The misalignment of preferences with unconstrained ethical intentions. *Journal of Business Ethics, 76*(4), 361–383.

Autio, M., Heiskanen, E., & Heinonen, V. (2009). Narratives of 'green' consumers—The antihero, the environmental hero and the anarchist. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 8*(1), 40–53.

Barnett, C., Cloke, P., Clarke, N., & Malpass, A. (2010). *The political rationalities of ethical consumption*. Oxford: Wiley.

Bekin, C., Carrigan, M., & Szmigin, I. (2005). Defying marketing sovereignty: Voluntary simplicity at new consumption communities. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 8*(4), 413–429.

Belz, F. M., & Peattie, K. (2009). *Sustainability marketing: A global perspective*. Chichester: Wiley.

Bray, J., Johns, N., & Kilburn, D. (2011). An exploratory study into the factors impeding ethical consumption. *Journal of Business Ethics, 98*(4), 597–608.

Carrigan, M., & Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer—Do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 18*(7), 560–578.

Carrington, M. J., Neville, B. A., Canniford, R. (2012). Seeking the coherent moral self: A process of alignment. In Z. Gürhan-Canli, C. Otnes & R. J. Zhu (Eds.), *NA—Advances in Consumer Research* (Vol. 40, pp. 718–719). Duluth, MN: Association for Consumer Research.

Carrington, M. J., Neville, B. A., & Whitwell, G. J. (2010). Why ethical consumers don't walk their talk: Towards a framework for understanding the gap between ethical purchase intentions and actual buying behaviour of ethically minded consumers. *Journal of Business Ethics, 97*(1), 139–158.

Carrington, M. J., Neville, B. A., & Whitwell, G. J. (2014). Lost in translation: Exploring the ethical consumer intention-behaviour gap. *Journal of Business Research, 67*(1), 2759–2767.

Caruana, R. (2007a). Morality and consumption: Towards a multi-disciplinary perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(3–4), 207–225.

Caruana, R. (2007b). A sociological perspective of consumption morality. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 6*(5), 287–304.

Caruana, R., & Chatzidakis, A. (2013). Consumer social responsibility (CnSR): Toward a multi-level, multi-agent conceptualization of the other CSR. *Journal of Business Ethics, 113*, 1–16.

Chatzidakis, A., Hibbert, S., & Smith, A. P. (2007). Why people don't take their concerns about fair trade to the supermarket: The role of neutralisation. *Journal of Business Ethics, 74*(1), 89–100.

Chatzidakis, A., Maclaran, P., & Bradshaw, A. (2012). Heterotopian space and the utopics of ethical and green consumption. *Journal of Marketing Management, 28*(3–4), 494–515.

Connolly, J., & Prothero, A. (2008). Green consumption: Life-politics, risk, and contradictions. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*, 117–145.

Davies, J., Foxall, G. R., & Pallister, J. (2002). Beyond the intention–behaviour mythology: An integrated model of recycling. *Marketing Theory, 2*, 29–113.

De Pelsmaker, P., Driesen, L., & Rayp, G. (2005). Do consumers care abour ethics? Willingness to pay for fair-trade coffee. *Journal of Consumer Affairs, 39*(2), 363–385.

Gill, J. D., Crosby, A. L., & Taylor, J. R. (1986). Ecological concern, attitudes, and social norms in voting behavior. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 50*, 537–554.

Hollway, W. (2007). *The capacity to care: Gender and ethical subjectivity*. Hove: Taylor & Francis.

Hunt, S. D., & Vitell, S. (1986). A general theory of marketing ethics. *Journal of Macromarketing, 6*(1), 5–16.

Luzar, E. J., & Cosse, K. J. (1998). Willingness to pay or intention to pay: The attitude-behaviour relationship in contingent evaluation. *Journal of Socio-Economics, 27*(3), 427–444.

Nicholls, A., & Lee, N. (2006). Purchase decision-making in fair trade and the ethical purchase 'gap': 'Is there a fair trade twix?'. *Journal of Strategic Marketing, 14*(4), 369–386.

Ogden, J. (2003). Some problems with social cognition models: A pragmatic and conceptual analysis. *Health Psychology, 22*(4), 424.

Shaw, D., & Clarke, I. (1999). Belief formation in ethical consumer groups: an exploratory study. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 17*(2), 109–120.

Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2002a). An assessment of ethical obligation and self-identity in ethical consumer decision-making: a structural equation modelling approach. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 26*(4), 286–293.

Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2002b). The role of ethical obligation and self-identity in ethical consumer choice. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 26*(2), 109–116.

Shaw, D., & Shiu, E. (2003). Ethics in consumer choice: A multivariate modelling approach. *European Journal of Marketing, 37*(10), 1485–1498.

Shaw, D., Shiu, E., & Clarke, I. (2000). The contribution of ethical obligation and self-identity to the theory of planned behaviour: An exploration of ethical consumers. *Journal of Marketing Management, 16*(8), 879–894.

Simola, S. (2012). Exploring "embodied care" in relation to social sustainability. *Journal of Business Ethics, 107*(4), 473–484.

Simola, S., Barling, J., & Turner, N. (2012). Transformational leadership and leaders' mode of care reasoning. *Journal of Business Ethics, 108*(2), 229–237.

Sykes, G. M., & Matza, D. (1957). Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *Americal Sociological Review, 22*(6), 664–670.

Szmigin, I., Carrigan, M. & McEachern, M. G. (2009). The conscious consumer: Taking a flexible approach to ethical behaviour. *International Journal of Consumer Studies, 33*, 224–231.

Trudel, R., & Cotte, J. (2009). Does it pay to be good. *MIT Sloan Management Review, 50*(2), 61–68.

Vaughan, P., Cook, M., & Trawick, P. (2007). A sociology of reuse: Deconstruction the milk bottle. *Sociological Ruralis, 47*(2), 120–134.

Young, W., Hwang, K., McDonald, S., & Oates, C. J. (2010). Sustainable consumption: Green consumer behaviour when purchasing products. *Sustainable Development, 18*(1), 20–31.