

Understanding Consumer Behaviour for Social Change

—An Empirical Investigation of Neutralisation Techniques in the UK

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[Abstract]

The paper investigates the attitude-behaviour gap in ethical consumption. Drawing on findings of 251 respondents in the UK, results suggest despite positive attitude towards ethical consumption, consumers are also susceptible to the techniques of neutralisation. Hierarchical and moderated regression analyses reveal that inclusion of the neutralisation construct moderates the influences of attitudes on behavioural intention, and advances the model's predictive capacity. In spite of suggested positive attitude towards ethical consumption, real existing behaviour is frequently filtered through the techniques of neutralisation. The sample is restricted in size and location, however the study clearly establishes neutralisation techniques as a construct in the decision-making process, and confirms validity of the addition of the neutralisation construct into the modified TPB model noted by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007). It suggests improvement in predicting behavioural intention and shows the moderating effects that techniques of neutralisation have on constructs in the modified TPB model.

1. Introduction

At the 6th JFBS conference under the theme of *Marketing and Social Change*, one of the authors of this paper argued we need to understand the consumer perspective through the lens of ethical consumption, if, that is, we are

to develop a marketing approach that reflects the sort of progressive change we wish to bring to society. There is, of course, precedent for such a view. The following text by Adam Smith articulates the connectivity of individuals in society and the multi-faceted roles we play as consumer, supplier, merchant and so forth:

When the division of labour has been once thoroughly established, it is but a very small part of a man's wants which the produce of his own labour can supply. He supplies the far greater part of them by exchanging that surplus part of the produce of his own labour, which is over and above his own consumption, for such parts of the produce of other men's labour as he has occasion for. *Every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes, in some measure, a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society.* (Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776 [2007: 17] emphasis added)

Adam Smith offers an account of the environment we *live in*, describing the interdependence of people as well as the multiple roles we play. Rather than considering the 'division of labour' simply in terms of separation, Smith suggests of a working together, that we live by exchanging. We are born into the system of exchange: everyone is effectively a consumer and more besides, we are all part of a system of exchange. Are market ethics then up to businesses or consumers? It is in fact through multiple roles that we are all contributing to the ethical 'landscape'. Bringing about the sort of change we wish to see in society more broadly is inevitably at the behest not only of businesses but also consumers. Indeed, while someone maybe a manager of a company, they will equally be a consumer at other times, in other situations.

When reviewing ethical perspectives in

marketing, one common reference point is *laissez-faire* economics (the suggestion that we 'let the market decide'). What it is implied here about the role of consumers from the business perspective is that as long as customers are happy (that they are making the decisions that they do, showing market loyalties etc.), companies must be doing 'right' because the 'customer is always right'; indeed the 'customer is king'. The much cited (and arguably mis-quoted) reference to Adam Smith's notion of the 'invisible hand' gives rise to the idea that consumers themselves ensure an effective 'policing' of the market, that their decision-making can eliminate unintended and unwanted consequences of business practices. A frequent assumption being made, however, is that businesses are only *attending* to the market space, rather than actually existing (and themselves consuming) within it. Yet the notion of a business as a 'corporate citizen' needs to taken on in a more holistic, engaged sense – to understand consumption as a *shared* experience – if we are to envisage the means to do *better* for the society.

Of course, in examining the actions of consumers (including how businesses engage in and understand ethical conduct), the critical question is whether as consumers 'we' (being interconnected members of society) always do the right thing. To explore this question in more depth, this paper draws upon a case from the UK market. From 1999–2007 a surge in consumer interest in ethical consumption (e.g. supporting local shops and recycling) occurred across all age groups in the UK (Carrigan and de Pelsmacker, 2009) and there has been a steady in-

crease over subsequent years. In 2011, the overall UK market for ethical products was worth £46.8 billion (a near 8.8% increase from the 2010 figure of £43 billion, Co-operative Bank, 2011). In 2014, ethical money and ethical spending in the UK is said to have risen by a further £38 billions (8%) from the previous year, reaching £80 billion. However, this growing trend towards ethical consumption accounts for only 5.7% of overall UK household expenditure (£1380 billion / £1.38 trillion) in 2014 (Euromonitor International, 2016). While growth in ethical consumption has increased both in proportional and absolute terms, it nonetheless remains a small percentage of overall consumer expenditure. The market share for ethical consumption is still small, thus pursuing ethical products is seen as specialist.

In line with these trends, research illustrates that the attitudes of consumers towards ethical consumption have become more positive than in the past. However, this shift in attitude does not appear to have been translated into consistent behavioural patterns (Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright, 2004; Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004); consumer purchasing is inconsistent with their positive attitude towards ethical products. The inconsistency has been persistent for a while. One study (Futerra, 2005, p.23) found that while 30 percent of consumers said that they would purchase ethical products, only 3 percent of them actually do. Another study by Young et al. (2010) found that 30% of their respondents estimated to be concerned about environmental issues but only 5% acted on such a concern.

Even in the domain of consumer activism, inconsistencies between political and consumer behaviour of an individual, but also is seen to exist across purchasing contexts (Sagoff, 2007). In the contexts of ethical consumerism (De Pelsmacker, Driessen and Rayp, 2005; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007), consumers may claim to want to behave ethically, but can in reality make other choices at the point of sale (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Belk, Devinney and Eckhardt, 2005). This has profound implications for marketers of ethical products, not least as marketing campaigns centring purely on ethical interests can be costly failures (Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010). A recent special issue in *Journal of Business Ethics* provides a number of studies that take a closer look at the attitude-behaviour gap (Caruana, Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2016). The editorial introduction reviews existing literatures which are broadly categorised into positivist and interpretivist streams of research⁽¹⁾. The editors note that the positivist stream of research focuses on understanding the effect of methodological flaws (e.g., effect of socially desirable responding style), situational issues (e.g., lack of consumers' finance and time, product information asymmetry) and the addition of further constructs (e.g., *ethical obligation*; *self-identity*; *techniques of neutralisation*) in order to explain the gap. The study presented here focuses on the last of these concerns, i.e. to investigate further constructs in explaining the attitude-behaviour gap.

Understanding the gap between the attitude of consumers and what they actually purchase has become a vital managerial, aca-

demic, and social objective (Belk, Devinney and Eckhardt, 2005; Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010). Behaviour relates to an instance in which someone acts, which is always difficult to capture in a form that is appropriate to comparative analysis. Thus, more typically, as is the approach of the current study, researchers examine intention, as this is assumed to be the immediate antecedent of behaviour. It must be stressed it is not always the case that intention results in behaviour. More specifically, as Ajzen (1985) argues, 'intention can only be expected to predict a person's attempt to perform behaviour, not necessarily its actual performance.' There are, then, remaining factors affecting success or failure of performing a specific behaviour. These factors (e.g., changing attitudes over time, inability to overcome various obstacles to execute intentions) are beyond one's control and result in a failure to observe the predicted behaviour. Nonetheless, it is considered that 'intentions are indicators of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behaviour' (Beck and Ajzen, 1991, p.286). A working assumption is that the stronger the assumption the more likely the behaviour specified in the process of evaluation is performed; furthermore intention is presumed to capture motivational factors influencing a behaviour.

Across a spectrum of behaviour, consumers may make many decisions everyday without necessarily being consistent in the scrutiny of one's actions. Thus, rather than focusing on *ethical* judgments, the current study does not

assume that consumers are necessarily being proactive in being ethical in their activities. Instead it acknowledges the decision to buy a particular product is based on a number of factors. So, for example, some consumers may consider their own actions as having very little effect when set against the bigger picture of consumer trends. In this case, the view generally held is that an individual's actions set against a perceived status quo are not going to have any real impact. Similarly, we might find that while a consumer is very deliberate in purchasing ethical products, it does not necessarily mean they are seriously concerned with the ethical issues to which the product pertains. Such a consumer, for example, may make their decisions based on only vague associations relating to peers or fragmentary information. Thus, this study accepts the idea that even consumers with a highly ethical consumption perspective can make decisions based on a variety of considerations, without necessarily manifesting *patterns* of behaviour in line with their ethical views. When considering the development of the field of consumer ethics, Vitell (2003, p.45) has noted previously how 'even normally ethical consumers can easily rationalize unethical behaviours by appealing to the techniques of neutralisation'. Such 'techniques', then, can potentially explain a great deal 'as to why otherwise ethical consumers sometimes behave unethically' (Vitell, 2003, p.45). The current study picks up on this suggestion, and takes the view a spectrum exists upon we can consider more relative positions of ethical-unethical behaviour. The purpose of the cur-

rent paper, then, is to explore the discrepancy between attitude and behavioural intention with a focus on the role of neutralisation. Specifically, it evaluates the inclusion of neutralisation in a modified theory of planned behaviour.

The findings of the current study suggest that although consumers have a positive attitude towards ethical consumption, they have also been found to favourably accept the techniques of neutralisation. Furthermore, hierarchical regression analyses reveal that not only does the inclusion of techniques of neutralisation improve the modelling of predictive capacity but they also moderate the influences of attitudes on behavioural intention. In addition, neutralisation has a significant direct effect on intention. In spite of a wide range of evidence to suggest positive attitude towards ethical consumption, real existing behaviour is frequently filtered through the techniques of neutralisation. It is evident that understanding the role of the techniques of neutralisation helps provide a fuller explanation of consumer decision-making in the ethical context, and can lead to future practical implications.

2. Understanding ethical consumption

Ethical consumption encompasses a broad array of ethical commitments and issues relevant to a wide range of consumer products and services. It concerns the actions of an individual consumer freely selecting and purchasing a product after considering various ethical issues, for example, human rights, labour conditions, environment, animal well-be-

ing etc. (Strong, 1996; Doane, 2001; Crane, 2001). Ethical purchases are said to include, among other things, 'green, socially responsible, and fair trade' products (Valor, 2007, p.675). However, it does not directly follow that all consumption of ethical products is a deliberate engagement in ethical consumption and/or that all ethical consumption is genuinely founded in adherence to ethical principles in the first instance. In explaining green consumption, for example, Peattie (2001) notes there are some consumers who are willing to make their purchases on the basis of green labels or green consumer guild recommendations. Yet, consumers may not necessarily have any intention of changing their lifestyles, or reconsider how they manage their overall consumption patterns. They may also purchase green products with little care about the environment. Hence, green consumers and green advocates cannot be assumed to be the same. Ethical consumption, then, can be said to define a broad spectrum of behaviour, which includes the consumption choices of a range of consumers who (in various ways) may or may not incorporate ethical and moral aspects of production when selecting products. Given that the purchasing of ethical goods does not necessarily reflect a firm commitment to ethical living, the current investigation examines how intention to purchase ethical products manifests, *regardless* of what we might initially know of a purchaser's positive or negative attitude toward buying an ethical product.

In order to explain inconsistent behaviour in the context of ethical consumption, previ-

ous studies suggest factors such as lack of information, product availability and product choice (Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004; Dahlstrand, 2005; Young et al., 2010); as well as price sensitivity and product quality (Bray et al., 2011). In choosing *not* to purchase ethical products, consumers may rationalize their choice through a cynicism toward profit-making business, and/or suppress feelings of guilt by assuming potential impact of their action being insignificant (Bray et al., 2011). Bourdieu (1984 as cited in Henry, 2010, p.672), for example, refers to consumers from a poorer economic bracket ‘as having a “taste for necessity” that promotes more limited horizons and fatalistic thinking. Such fatalism is likely to affect how consumers think about their rights and responsibilities, via greater resignation and acceptance of power imbalances in markets’.

These views arguably extend beyond merely those of lower economic standing. As Wilk (2001 as cited in Henry, 2010, p.672) notes, ‘consumption is in essence a moral matter, since it always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs. group interest, and immediate vs. delayed gratification’. Nevertheless, across all social backgrounds, there is a perennial tension between self-serving interests and collective well-being (Henry, 2010; Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler, 2009).

These issues lead to the need to focus on the apparent gap between attitude and behaviour in the context of ethical consumption. An exploration of the techniques of neutralisation can help to explain inconsistencies arising from the assumption that consumers tend to moderate attitudes before implementing their

intentions. The moderating effects of the techniques of neutralisation on ethical decision-making (Sykes and Matza, 1957) have been given some attention in both business (e.g., Anand, Ashforth and Joshi, 2005) and consumer contexts (e.g. Padel and Foster, 2005; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2004; 2007; Valor, 2007). In addition (as noted in the introduction), based on an extensive literature review on consumer ethics, Vitell (2003) highlights the importance of expanding our knowledge base of the concept of neutralisation. The empirical investigation for the current study was designed to examine, in step, three related models to explain the decision-making process of ethical consumption, and in turn to establish and examine a role of a construct concerning rationalization (i.e., the techniques of neutralisation). The models – as discussed in the following section – are the theory of planned behaviour (TPB, Ajzen, 1985; 1991), the modified TPB for ethical consumption (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000), and the modified TPB with the techniques of neutralisation (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007).

3. Modelling the decision-making process

The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985; 1991) has been widely applied to investigate social behaviour, including ethical behaviour. TPB includes the two components of the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1980) – attitude and subjective norm – alongside a third component – perceived behavioural control – to predict behavioural intention. More recently, the core framework of

TPB has been broadened to include additional measures of ethical obligation and self-identity (i.e. self-identification as an 'ethical' consumer), noted to be relevant in ethical consumption contexts (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw and Shiu, 2003). Prior studies have shown that, in general, attitude alone is a poor predictor of purchaser behaviour (Cobb-Walgren, Ruble and Donthu, 1995); this is evident, for example, in the area of fair-trading (Shaw and Clarke, 1999). On account of the research of Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000), ethical obligation is found to independently contribute to the prediction of intention. This is in keeping with findings reported by Sparks and Shepherd (1992) and Raats et al. (1992). Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000) also note that the role of self-identity helps improve the predictability of intention; illustrating a significant improvement of the TPB model.

In the context of ethical consumption, Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000) argue behavioural beliefs and outcome evaluations (components of attitude) may not be of a purely self-interested nature. For instance, attitude to fair trade products is likely to be influenced by a sense of ethical obligation more than being driven by self-motivated concerns only. In other words, in certain contexts, behaviour tends to be centred around concerns for others. In addition, ethical behaviour is not merely driven by the expectations of society, it is also a reflection of an individual's beliefs regarding what is moral and what is immoral (Shaw, Grehan and Shiu, 2005).

The addition of ethical obligation and self-identity improves the capacity of the tradi-

tional TPB model to predict intention. This is particularly pertinent in the contexts of ethical consumption where attitude alone is not adequate to overcome perceived difficulties in purchasing (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000). Arguably, then, the modified TPB provides a conceptually well-grounded model for investigating attitude and beliefs underlying a certain issue (Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004). However, while ethical obligation and self-identity are important when predicting the intentions of those who purchase ethical products, it is not yet known why those who believe in ethical purchases, in *principle*, do not act upon their beliefs by purchasing ethical products. Here, other aspects of the decision-making process may need to be considered. In particular techniques of neutralisation and moral rationalizations whereby, for example, we can 'employ *external* justification, by which we minimize our responsibility for [a] dissonant act by calling on excuses out of our control' (Lowell, 2012, p.19) may be relevant. Such rationalizations not only allow a discrete action to become permissible, but can also lead to subsequent behaviour, whereby 'once successfully internalized, they can truly become neutralizing devices ... as opposed to post behavioural rationalizations' (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007, p.90). More generally, then, as Bersoff (1999) argues, unethical behaviour 'is not [necessarily the] result of moral judgment failing to determine action but rather moral judgment corrupted by self-serving interests succeeding in determine action' (p.424).

Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2004) asserts that although the techniques of neutrali-

sation are commonly employed in deviant behaviours, they can also be used in normatively flexible contexts, such as purchasing fair-trade products and recycling. O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) have stated that the primary function of neutralisation is to bring back balance when consumers act in an attitudinally incongruent manner without attitude change. Neutralisation may be an important moderating variable that explains ethical breaches in everyday choices that consumers make (Holland, Meertens and Van Vugt, 2002 cited in Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007).

While the techniques of neutralisation appear appropriate to the investigation of the decision making process in ethical consumption, its notion has not been fully explored. One pertinent exception is De Bock and van Kenhove's (2011) study of consumer response to unethical corporate behaviour. In this case, the authors show how techniques of neutralisation can explain how 'the same respondents who justify questionable consumer actions to a certain degree, condone the same misbehaviours instigated by business (representative) to a much lesser extent' (p.283). Furthermore, and with more specific pertinence to the current study, Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007) argue that the notion of neutralisation may be key to understanding the attitude-behaviour gap in purchasing ethical products (i.e., fair trade products). Following their proposal to add a new construct, neutralisation, to the modified TPB model (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000), the current study conducted an empirical investigation to look further into the influence of neutralisation within the process of

ethical decision-making in ethical consumption. In summary, the study examines three models in steps – i.e. TPB (Ajzen, 1991), modified TPB (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000) and modified TPB incorporating the techniques of neutralisation (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007). Subsequently, it examines the extent to which the model with neutralisation offers a fuller explanation of the decision-making process in ethical consumption.

4. Theoretical framework and propositions

Originally, the neutralisation theory was developed by Sykes and Matza (1957) to explain criminal behaviour. Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007), who found neutralisation helped understand the attitude-behaviour discrepancies in fair-trade consumption contexts, describe neutralisation as 'a mechanism that facilitates behaviour that is either norm violating or in contravention of expressed attitude'; as such, 'when social norms are not being internalized to the degree that they can guide behaviour under all conditions, people might develop coping strategies to cope with the discrepancy that they experience' (pp.89–90). Sykes and Matza (1957) identify five different techniques to cope with such discrepancy: denial of responsibility; denial of injury; denial of victim; condemning the condemners; and appeal to higher loyalties (Appendix 1). Adopting these techniques allows individuals to restore 'equilibrium without attitude change' (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007, p.94). Individuals are likely to insulate themselves from self-blame, and therefore learn patterns of

thought that can help them to remain committed to the normative system and qualify their actions as 'acceptable' if not 'right' (Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007, p.90).

Researchers using the TPB to explore ethical decision-making have shown that one reason why individuals' behaviours are not always consistent with their attitudes is dissonance (Uusitalo and Oksanen, 2004; Dahlstrand, 2005; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2004; 2007; McGregor, 2006; Young et al., 2010). The current study investigates the role of neutralisation as a source of such dissonance. It examines the relationship between attitudes and intentions that can lead to the discrepancy. Hence, the current empirical investigation has three aims (partially examining some of the propositions made by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007), which derive from mapping the components of TPB (i.e. attitude, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control) with modified TPB components (ethical obligation and self-identity) and the incorporation of the techniques of neutralisation. The first aim is to examine whether or not the modified TPB will be predictive of behavioural intentions (based on the model by Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000). The second aim is to examine whether or not the incorporation of the neutralisation variable into the modified TPB will lead to an increase in the amount of variance explained in behavioural intention (along the lines of the model by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007). The third aim is to examine whether the techniques of neutralisation will moderate the relationship between the modified TPB variables and behavioural intention.

5. Research methodology

In conducting a survey of UK consumers, the current study designated ethical products as being fair trade, organic, recycled, re-used, produced locally, cruelty free, free of sweatshop labour conditions, and/or environmentally friendly. An elicitation questionnaire was employed as suggested by Fishbein and Ajzen (1980). All the measures for the modified TPB used in this research were taken from Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000). Neutralisation was measured using items modified from the study on the role of neutralisation in fair-trade products by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007) and the work of Strutton, Vitell and Pelton (1994) on an application of the techniques of neutralisation. Both the modified TPB and neutralisation variables were assessed on 7-point scales, scored from 1 (negative/disagree) to 7 (positive/agree). Prior to administering the questionnaires, a pre-test was carried out. Further details of the questionnaire are given in Appendix 2.

251 responses were collected from metropolitan areas in the North of England, UK. The respondents were recruited from shopping areas as this research was particularly interested in the consumers' attitude. The objective of the study was associated with any consumers in the UK so the 'mall'-intercept sampling method was considered to be appropriate. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample.

Table 1 Demographic profile of respondents (Total number = 251)

Gender (no response = 1)	Male = 113				Female = 137			
Age (no response = 0)	Under 24 years old = 47		25-34 years old = 73		35-44 years old = 95		Over 45 years old = 36	
Marital status (no response = 5)	Living with spouse/partner = 101			Single = 119		Other = 26		
Any children? (no response = 9)	Yes = 80				No = 162			
Education (no response = 4)	Up to A-levels = 42		University Diploma = 41		Bachelor degree = 84		Post-graduate degree = 80	
Annual household income (no response = 27)	Under £10K = 22	£10- 20K = 20	£20- 30K = 81	£30- 40K = 45	£40- 50K = 28	£50- 75K = 20	£75- 100K = 5	Over £100K = 2

6. Findings

The scales show acceptable levels of reliability (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .603 to .910) and the correlations between variables indicate that while some relationships exist, there is also a clear distinction between the different concepts (Table 2). In addition, the levels of kurtosis (from -1.02 to 1.07) and skew (from -0.76 to 0.39) do not indicate any major deviations from normality. The range of means varies from 3.3 with subjective norms (indicating that respondents did not feel that they were expected to buy ethical products) and neutralisation, to 5.7 with perceived behavioural control.

A hierarchical regression analysis is used (Table 3) to evaluate the three models. Initially this is to assess whether the modified TPB can predict behavioural intention; then it assesses whether the incorporation of the neutralisation variable into the modified TPB leads to an increase in the amount of variance in behavioural intention explained. The hier-

archical regression clearly shows that the TPB is a good predictor of behavioural intentions ($R^2_{adj}=.46$). However, including ethical obligation and self-identity significantly improves the amount of variance in behavioural intentions explained ($R^2_{adj}=.54$, $\Delta R^2=.08$), indicating that modifying the TPB in this way does improve predictive ability. The power of prediction is improved further when neutralisation is added in the analysis ($R^2_{adj}=.59$, $\Delta R^2=.05$). Across all three models, attitude and subjective norm consistently have a positive impact on respondents' intention to purchase an ethical product. However, their impact is decreased when ethical obligation and self-identity are included in the equation, and further decreases when neutralisation is added.

The final aim of the current empirical investigation is to assess the effects of interactions between the modified TPB variables and neutralisation. That is, whether neutralisation will moderate, or influence, the relationship between the modified TPB variables (attitudes, subjective norm, behavioural control,

ethical obligation and self-identity) and behavioural intention. A hierarchical moderated regression is used to investigate the direct and indirect impacts of neutralisation on the TPB variables (see Table 4). It shows that each variable, with the exception of perceived behavioural control, is a significant predictor of behavioural intentions ($R^2_{adj} = .54$, beta coefficients from .14 to .31). However, adding the direct and indirect (moderating) effects of neutralisation lead to a significant change in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .08$). The findings show neutralisation has a significant direct effect on intention and moderates the relationships between behavioural intention and subjective norm; and behavioural intention and ethical obligation. In addition, when the direct and indirect impact of neutralisation is taken into account, the main effect of perceived behavioural control is significant, while the main effects of attitude, subjective norm, ethical obligation and self-identity are not significant.

7. Discussion

The current study seeks to investigate the gap between consumers' attitude and intention towards purchasing ethical products in the UK context. It is designed to examine a three-step model (i.e., TPB, modified TPB, and modified TPB with neutralisation) applicable to the decision-making process in ethical consumption. The key focus has been to examine the role of neutralisation with an expectation to discover a more powerful model to predict the behavioural intention to purchase ethical products. A general observation derived from the descriptive statistics (Table 2) is that consumers in the UK have positive intention (mean = 4.80) and attitude (mean = 5.40) towards ethical consumption. This is consistent with previous studies (Mintel, 2003; Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright, 2004; Carrigan and de Pelsmacker, 2009; Padel and Foster, 2005).

Table 2 Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis	Reliability	Correlations, N=249-251					
						Attitude	Subjective norms	Control	Ethical obligation	Self-identity	Neutralisation
Purchase intention	4.8	1.6	-.55	-.45	.902	.61***	.55***	.20***	.60***	.65***	-.64***
Attitude	5.4	1.0	-.71	1.07	.808		.47***	.31***	.61***	.56***	-.50***
Subjective norms	3.3	1.5	.39	-.59	.910			.00	.54***	.60***	-.48***
Control	5.7	1.0	-.76	.26	.603				.26***	.04	-.08
Ethical obligation	4.8	1.5	-.69	-.34	.788					.66***	-.48***
Self-identity	4.2	1.7	-.34	-.58	.813						-.58***
Neutralisation	3.3	1.5	.23	-1.02	.883						

N.B.: **p<.05, ***p<.01

Table 3 The impact of modifying the modified TPB on predicting behavioural intentions

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Attitudes	.43 ***	.25 ***	.19 ***
Subjective norm	.35 ***	.17 ***	.13 **
Control	.07	.08	.08
Ethical obligation		.14 **	.13 **
Self-identity		.31 ***	.21 ***
Neutralisation			-.30 ***
R ² _{adj}	.46 ***	.54 ***	.59 ***
R ² _{change}		.08 ***	.05 ***

N.B. : ** p<.05, *** p<.01

In the current study, when all factors are treated as influencing intention (i.e. to have direct impact), the findings are on a par with studies of a similar nature. The hierarchical linear regression analyses (Table 3) provide some interesting findings. Firstly, the two constructs added by Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000), self-identity and perceived ethical obligation, improve the predictability of the behavioural intention model (Table 3, Δ R²= 0.08, Step 1 to Step 2). This provides support to the study of Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000) for their addition of ethical obligation and self-identity to the TPB, within the context of ethical consumerism. Within the model, both self-identity (beta coefficient = 0.14, p< .01) and ethical obligation (beta coefficient = 0.31, p< .01) are found to have a significant impact on behavioural intention. This is also in line with the findings in the study of Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000); both factors are found to have a direct impact on predicting intentions. Secondly, the current study found that the construct of subjective

Table 4 Impact of neutralisation on TPB variables as predictors of behavioural intentions

	Step 1	Step 2
Attitudes	.25 ***	.22
Subjective norm	.17 ***	-.10
Control	.08	.19 *
Ethical obligation	.14 **	-.10
Self-identity	.31 ***	.19
Neutralisation		-.56 **
Attitudes by neutralisation		-.06
Subjective norm by neutralisation		.28 **
Control by neutralisation		-.22
Ethical obligation by neutralisation		.32 *
Self-identity by neutralisation		-.06
R ² _{adj}	.54 ***	.62 ***
R ² _{change}		.08 ***

N.B. : *p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

norm has a significant direct influence on behavioural intention across all the three models in this study (without taking account of interaction effects of the neutralisation) (Table 3). In fact, even after the addition of the constructs ethical obligation and self-identity, subjective norm maintains a significant direct effect on intention. Such a finding is in keeping with Kalafatis et al. (1999), who note the importance of social norm as a determinant of intention.

It is important to note, however, Vallerand et al. (1992) and Shaw, Shiu and Clarke (2000) find subjective norm to be insignificant or to be least influential when predicating intention. Noting here a contrast with the current study, one explanation for the ‘poor performance of the subjective norm determinant lies in its measurement as many scholars use

single item measures, as opposed to more reliable multi-item scales' (Armitage and Conner, 2001, p.478). Further to this explanation, another contributing factor may relate to the techniques of neutralisation. In the current study, the inclusion of neutralisation generates an increment, however small, in predicting intention (Table 3, Step 3, $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$). Its impact is also found to be statistically significant (beta coefficient = -0.30, $p < .01$). This finding supports the proposition by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2004) that neutralisation is appropriate and applicable to explain a less deviant behaviour context like ethical consumption. This finding also places the role of neutralisation within the TPB model.

The hierarchical regression analysis shown in Table 4, which includes the interaction effect of neutralisation, was significant with an overall predictive power of 0.62 ($p < 0.01$). This is an improvement from the modified model (Step 1 to Step 2, $\Delta R^2 = 0.08$) and also the neutralisation model which does not take account of any interactions (Table 3, Step 3). The impact of each of the constructs was moderated by neutralisation (Table 4, Step 2), except for the construct for perceived behavioural control. In response to the impact of neutralisation, the main effects of subjective norm and ethical obligation disappear, however they continue to positively influence consumers' intention to purchase an ethical product through their interaction with neutralisation. For example, despite consideration of numerous self-serving excuses, the significant impact of subjective norm by neutralisation suggests the expectations we attribute to what peers/society think

of our actions may still motivate intention to purchase an ethical product. Thus, moderation by neutralisation on subjective norm needs to be taken account when it comes to predicting behavioural intention. Similarly, the significant impact of ethical obligation by neutralisation can mean that where we feel obligated to pursue an ethical value, there follows a commitment to purchase an ethical product.

Perceived behavioural control is also significant *after* taking account its interaction with neutralisation. This might suggest that if we have the 'right' attitude to purchase ethical products, access and control with respect to ethical consumption is important in overcoming any final barrier in making a purchase. With the example of recycling, a significant correlation was found between positive attitude and perceived behavioural control (Tonglet, Phillips and Read, 2004). In this case, the researchers did not find a significant impact of perceived behavioural control on intention for recycling. They explained that this may have been caused by the nature of their sample: perceived behavioural control may not be relevant to the decision-making process of those who have access to a local authority's curbside recycling scheme. Furthermore, they argue that perceived behavioural control would be 'more appropriate for explaining the behaviour of those who do not recycle or do not have access to recycling resource' (Tonglet, Phillips and Read, 2004, p.210). It is worth noting that, while perceived behavioural control measures the degree of control an individual perceives they have, neutralisation in the form of 'denial of responsibility' is attributed to a

sense of *lack* of control. Together perceived behavioural control and neutralisation account for two sides of the same coin (i.e., control and/or lack of), helping to explain why interest towards ethical consumption may not always lead to ethical consumer behaviour.

An intriguing finding, however, is that self-identity (i.e., self-identification as an 'ethical' consumer) appears weakened by the interaction of neutralisation. If individuals firmly consider themselves to be ethical consumers, the technique of neutralisation – the very process of rationalization itself – is irrelevant. Nonetheless, due to a range of problems and circumstances (e.g. lack of availability of a product), even ardent ethical consumers can potentially fail to uphold ethical principles. Mitchell et al. (2009) have shown in a previous report that up to 75% of respondents (across UK, US, France and Austria) have engaged in unethical consumption on at least one occasion (including behaviours such as copying software and providing misleading information). Similarly, in two separate studies (Rawwas, 1996; Fullerton et al., 1996), less than one fifth of the respondents asserted a strong ethical position. The implication is that the majority (over 80%) of the sample appear to make ethical judgments based on a given situation rather than according to universal moral principles. In which case, self-identity is arguably not driving their behaviour, but rather other factors specific to a situation. Equally, however, a de-emphasis of self-identity in the study can also be said to relate to the fact that neutralisation is by default concerned with the externalization of a problem. It designates a problem or barrier that

goes beyond the individual. While in truth we might argue it is the individual who evokes this barrier or a justification to perform a behaviour for their own benefit, their own perception is that the cause lies elsewhere, outside of themselves.

Overall, the techniques of neutralisation can be seen not only to be deployed by consumers (so having a direct negative impact on intention to purchase an ethical product, as shown in Table 3, Step 3), but also to affect the degree of impact of the other variables (Table 4, Step 2). The results indicate strongly the role of neutralisation as a moderator in the TPB as addressed by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007), and indeed provide further clarity and complexity by bringing to the fore the interaction of factors by neutralisation.

8. Conclusion

The current research has tested the proposed model of Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007), who integrated individuals' mental strategies or techniques of neutralisation into the modified TPB model (Shaw, Shiu and Clarke, 2000). The results of the current study broadly concur with the propositions by Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith (2007). Furthermore, the current analysis suggests improvement in predicting behavioural intention and shows the moderating effects the techniques of neutralisation have on the remaining constructs in the modified TPB model. Additionally, the neutralisation construct is itself found to have a significant impact on moderating purchasing intention in ethical consumption (beta coef-

ficient = -0.56, $p < 0.01$).

Mitchell and Chan (2002) note the techniques of neutralisation do not represent total rejection of norms, yet they are a means to decrease a norm's influence in situations perceived not to be socially acceptable. Minor (1981) finds neutralisation techniques are more commonly employed by those who have a strong bond to the conventional moral order, given that they seek to restore equilibrium without changing their attitude (cited in Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007), thus they can engage in less ethical behaviour without experiencing guilt. McGregor (2008) has stated that consumers view their *passive* unethical action as a more acceptable behaviour. This view can extend to non-engagement in ethical consumption or when consumers employ mental strategies to deny any blame and absent others through their purchasing choices. These discussions support the idea that in real situations with regards to ethical consumption, positive attitude and moral concerns cannot, alone, assist consumers to overcome constraints that stand in the way of desirable behaviours. These constraints can lead individuals to rationalize less ethical consumption decisions. Thus, attitude and the perception of morality are inadequate to forecast actual ethical behaviour. However, as Irwin describes, sometimes all we need is a nudge in the right direction to alter or re-emphasise our actions, but which nonetheless is still suggestive of the interrelationship of situational factors:

People often want something different in the short term (e.g., chocolate cake) versus

the long term (e.g., achieving healthy weight). ... In the context of virtues such as eating healthy, exercising and saving money, sometimes all that is needed is a contextual push toward better behavior ... Marketers are all about nudging, so why not use it to promote more ethical consumer behavior? (Irwin, 2015)

Unfortunately Irwin doesn't illustrate any specific means to 'nudge' individuals to facilitate 'better' consumer engagements. Nonetheless the use of the more colloquial term, 'nudge', is perhaps a useful reminder of the more contingent, and even intimate circumstances in which we end up making choices. Arguably, marketers can pay attention not only to the explicit rational choices and patterns customers attend to, but equally to their more complex and even irrational behaviours. Indeed, each of us are likely to be open to genuine help or prompts from time to time, as the effect of social norms found in the current study implies.

Overall, the current investigation has addressed the role of the techniques of neutralisation as a potential cause that brings about the discrepancy between attitude and behaviour within the context of ethical consumption. Indeed, the theory of neutralisation can be another step towards answering the question posed by many scholars: 'Why ethical consumers don't walk the talk?' (Carrington, Neville and Whitwell, 2010, p.139). Inevitably, further research on the techniques of neutralisation in the context of ethical decision-making would be beneficial (Strutton, Vitell and Pel-

ton, 1994; Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007; McGregor, 2008). The sample in the current study is restricted in terms of size and only involved collecting data from one geographic region of the UK, which limits the significance of the results and degree to which implications can be inferred. In light of which, further investigation on the role of the techniques will be beneficial in order to enrich and ascertain its validity as one of the measures in the modified TPB model, particularly in cross-cultural settings as noted by Vitell (2003). Swaiden (2012) has found that consumer ethics and culture are connected. Culture might also have an impact on how neutralisation techniques influence the variables in the modified TPB model. For example, while this research found a moderating role for neutralisation with two of the five modified TPB variables, the UK is a highly individualistic culture. It may be that the impact of neutralisation changes in more collectivistic cultures where harmony with the group is highly valued (Hofstede, 1991). In addition, it is worth noting a critique toward businesses creating ethical products for the sake of their unique selling point and/or enhancing their brand value (resulting profit maximisation). Such acts are, to many consumers, that 'ethical products' may be seen as a marketing gimmick, so making perceptive consumers (who are often interested in ethical consumption) think twice about making purchases, i.e. to double-take whether or not they are actually 'doing good' in buying 'ethically marketed' products. Indeed, in this respect, ethical consumption can be critiqued along ideological grounds, as a

'new form' of capitalism (Carrington, Zwick and Neville, 2016). Thus, caution needs to be noted in marketing 'ethical' products, to ensure a serious attempt is made to achieve the stated aims.

Nonetheless, the theoretical implication of the current study warrants further, sustained investigation on the conceptual overlap between subjective norm and ethical obligation, as noted by previous studies (e.g. subjective norm and moral norm by Kaiser and Scheuthle, 2002; subjective norm and descriptive norm by Ravis and Sheeran, 2003). An overlap between the two constructs can take place in certain circumstances; for instance, in an ethically questionable situation where the likelihood of that an individual's ethical obligation is in line with the expectations of the society. More importantly, it would appear that some techniques better allow consumers to rationalize behaviours that are inconsistent with their beliefs (Grove, Vitell and Strutton, 1989, cited in Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007). This may be because they minimize their responsibility for the behaviour using external justification (Lowell, 2012). While the current study establishes the role of the techniques of neutralisation as a construct in the decision-making process, further in-depth examination of *each* of the techniques will provide value, and practical understanding for future strategy development fostering ethical consumption. Helping us, then, to better understand and respond to the 'moment' in which the consumer decides, and demonstrating that an individual's own beliefs do not necessarily play enough of a role in the wider consumption patterns to un-

derline their day to day living.

- (1) The interpretivist stream is observed to challenge the theoretical development of the positivist stream, in particular its methodological assumption that consumer behaviour is seen as 'rational and stripped away from a broader social, historical and cultural context' (Caruana, 2007a, b cited in Caruana, Carrington and Chatzidakis, 2016, p.215). The interpretivist stream of research is often developed interdisciplinary to enable researchers explore a complexity of people's daily lives where social-cultural influences intertwine and result in various modes of ethical consumption. While this stream of research brings an important (philosophical) debate, it is beyond the scope of the current study.

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Appendix 1 Techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1957; adopted from Chatzidakis, Hibbert and Smith, 2007, p.90)

Denial of responsibility	Is when a person takes no responsibility for her/his actions; on the contrary she/he blames factors outside of her/his control (e.g. It is not my fault, I had no other choices).
Denial of injury	Is when a person claims that no one got hurt by her/his behaviour and she/he claims that she/he did not cause any harm. This technique also includes the attitude that her/his behaviour will not make a difference or create an impact (e.g. What's the big deal, nobody will miss it).
Denial of victim	Is when a person justifies her/his behaviour by claiming that it is a right thing to do considering the circumstance (e.g. It is their fault; if they had been fair with me, I would not have done it).
Condemning the condemners	Is when a person places blame on the people condemning her/him instead of on her/himself (e.g. it is a joke they should find fault with me, after the rip-offs they have engineered).
Appeal to higher loyalties	Is when a person is caught in a circumstance that needs to be resolved by behaviour that violates the norms (e.g. to some what I did may appear wrong, but I did it for my family).

Appendix 2 Items (7-point scale, Disagree – Agree unless others noted)

Intention	<p>1. I expect to purchase an ethical product the next time I do my shopping.</p> <p>2. I want to purchase an ethical product the next time I do my shopping.</p> <p>3. I intend to purchase an ethical product the next time I do my shopping.</p>
Attitude	<p>4. My purchasing an ethical product will encourage retailers to stock ethical products.</p> <p>5. My purchasing an ethical product will result in my peace of mind.</p> <p>6. I believe buying ethical products is ... (unimportant – important)</p> <p>7. I believe supporting ethical companies is ... (unimportant – important)</p> <p>8. In general, purchasing ethical products is ... (harmful – beneficial)</p> <p>9. In general, purchasing ethical products is ... (unpleasant – pleasant)</p>
Subjective Norm	<p>10. My family thinks I should purchase ethical products.</p> <p>11. My friends think I should purchase ethical products.</p> <p>12. I tend to do what my family thinks I should do.</p> <p>13. I tend to do what my friends think I should do.</p> <p>14. Most people who are important to me think I should purchase ethical products.</p> <p>15. It is expected of me to purchase ethical products</p>
Perceived Behavioural Control	<p>16. The availability of the ethical products will not affect my purchase (item deleted due to poor fit).</p> <p>17. I am in charge in making decision to purchase ethical products.</p> <p>18. I am confident that I could purchase ethical products if I wanted to.</p> <p>19. For me the purchase of ethical products is easy.</p>
Ethical Obligation	<p>20. I feel that I have an ethical obligation to purchase ethical products.</p> <p>21. It would be morally right to purchase ethical products.</p>
Self-identity	<p>22. I think of myself as someone who is concerned about ethical issues.</p> <p>23. I want other people to see me as a person who is concerned about ethical issues.</p>
Techniques of Neutralisation	<p>24. I do not purchase ethical products because it is not my responsibility.</p> <p>25. I do not purchase ethical products because not buying them will not cause any serious injuries.</p> <p>26. I do not purchase ethical products because I care more about people who surround me such as my family and friends.</p> <p>27. I do not purchase ethical products because firms manufacture their products unethically. If the products had been produced ethically, I would not have bought unethical ones.</p> <p>26. I do not purchase ethical products because it is the firms that are at fault. They engineer methods of exploitation that have nothing to do with me.</p>