

Role of Ethical Self Identity in Predicting Buying Intentions toward Societal Friendly Products: A study of Societal Conscious Consumers

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Abstract

The study investigated the relation between ethical self identity and attitude with mediating role of attitude between ethical self identity and purchase intention in context of societal friendly products. Data was collected in 3 time lags from 220 societal conscious consumers of Pakistan who deliberately buy societal friendly products. The results indicate that ethical self identity of consumers predict attitude of consumers. The relation between ethical self identity and purchase intention is also explained through attitude. Additionally, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control directly influence purchase intention. The findings suggest that ethical self identity influence purchase intention of consumers if attitude toward societal friendly product is positive. Theoretical and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

Keywords: Ethical self identity, theory of planned behavior, buying intentions, Pakistan

Introduction

Over a last few decade, the term ethical consumption gained significance and importance in environmental and consumer studies (Papaoikonomou et al., 2012). The organizational efforts to protect the environment are directly linked with positive response of consumers toward environmental/societal friendly products (Kim, Lee, & Hur, 2012). Studies indicated that tendency to buy environment friendly products increased over a period of time (Yan, Hyllegard, & Blaesli, 2012). However, little is known about the personal dispositional factors such as ethical self identity of consumers. Thus lack of theoretical findings and suggestions are found which support the relation between ethical self identity and buying behavior. The current study examined ethical self identity as potential determinant of attitude as well as the mediating effect of attitude on purchase intention. The excessive research in ethical consumerism has been done on personality and ethical/cultural values.

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The horizon of ethical consumers is broad, which is categorized into societal, environmental, political, human rights violation, environmental deprivation, animal cruelty, anti-country feelings and opinions. However, the ethical behavior may be competing or contradictory as it entails variety of concerns and conducts (Papaoikonomou, Cascon-Pereira, & Ryan, 2014). Due to its competing or contradicting nature, a considerable amount of effort is needed for explaining and predicting environmental/societal purchase behaviors. A few studies have investigated ethical claims and concerns. Theory of Planned Behavior acts as a foundation for explaining ethical attitudes, behaviors and purchase intention from consumer perspective (Ajzen, 1985).

Consumers with environmental approaches tend to be more responsible towards society thus maintaining moral and ethical beliefs, obligation and duty at their optimum level (Soyez, 2012). Despite of the fact that ethical issues are a matter of interest in the market but considered as the ignored facet of consumer studies (Carrington et al., 2014). This study attempts to contribute in literature by examining the role of attitude as mediation between ethical self identity and purchase intention as little is known about the mechanics through which ethical self identity effect purchase intention. An added development is the implication of theory of planned behavior which holds significance in various studies of consumer behavior and ethical consumerism. It has also implications for companies who are involved in developing and promoting societal friendly product.

Theory and hypotheses

The impact of ethical Self Identity on attitude

Ethical self identity refers to the perception of people about themselves as ethical (Papaoikonomou, Valverde, & Ryan, 2012). Research on perceived ethical obligation and self-identity has gained prominence after the work of Vitell and Muncy (2005) on consumer ethics. Previous studies found that purchases of organic food are higher in ethical consumers. Ethical consumers buy organic food due to ethical motive and environmental benefits. Thus, ethical self-identity found to have positive relation with purchase intentions of organic food (Papaoikonomou et al., 2014). However, researchers recommend studying ethical beliefs of consumers regarding organic consumption of food. Moreover, a positive relation was found between consumer ethical beliefs and consumer attitude (Vitell, 2015).

Along the same lines researchers reported that ethical consumers are eco-conscious and buy products which are environmentally and societal safe (Laroche *et al.*, 2001; Harper and Makatouni, 2002). Likewise, the ethical motives of consumers influence the demand for organic (Hartman and Wright, 1999; McEachern and McClean, 2002). The ethical motives of consumers help them in formation of positive attitude which result in buying societal friendly products (Shaw *et al.*, 2000). Researchers are also of the opinion that ethical self identity is symbolic in nature which is found to predict attitude and intentions of customers while buying fair-trade groceries (Shaw and Shiu, 2003).

Sheeran and Hukkelberg (2010) conducted a study to examine the contribution of self identity in predicting consumers' behavioral intentions and found that self identity has an influence on behavior. A meta analysis was conducted (Rise et al, 2010) to predict the role of self identity under the light of theory of planned behavior which confirmed a strong correlation between ethical self identity and intentions. Further they mentioned that self identity is accounted for 9% increase in the intention through attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. Sparks and Shepherd (1992) also examined the role of green identity and found predictive and independent effect on consumer intentions. They also found that that green consumers prefer buying organic vegetables. Hence, we hypothesized that:

H₁: Ethical self-identity (SI) has a significant positive impact on consumers' attitude toward societal/environment friendly products.

Consumer's Attitude toward societal friendly products

Attitude is characterized as favorable or unfavorable evaluation of object. Researchers found a positive influence of attitude on intentions of consumers. They also argued that attitude is strong predictor of intention as compared to subjective norm (Hsieh, Rai, & Keil, 2008). Similarly, attitude has a positive impact on consumer intentions when buying green products. An individual's favorable attitude toward environment friendly products influences the intention of that person to show a desired behavior (Picazo-Vela, Chou, Melcher, & Pearson, 2010). Eagly and Chaiken, (1993) explained that beliefs are a cognitive component, attitude is an affective component and behavioral intention is a conative component. Due to which attitude is considered as strong predictor of intentions. Thus attitude has found to be one of the strongest predictor of intention. Accordingly, we hypothesized that:

Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: Consumer's Attitude mediates the relationship between ethical self-identity and consumer's intention to buy societal friendly products.

Subjective Norms and Consumer Intention

Subjective norm is defined as the performance or nonperformance of behavior with respect to perceived social pressure. It is the estimation of an individual that casts an influence in decision making. Subjective norm is predicted by the significant behaviors of others and their perceived judgment which influence the individual's behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Marquart-Pyatt and Sandra (2012) found that subjective norm influences green buying intention. Recent researches open the horizon for further search on intention to buy green product innovations (Ertz, Karakas, & Sarigöllü, 2016).

The advancing social pressure and norm to act green is strengthening the impact of subjective norms on purchase intentions to behave socio-friendly towards environment (Soyez, 2012). Allcott (2011) found that individual beliefs are representation of subjective norms. Kovalsky and Lusk (2013) found that buying organic products minimizes the uncertainty of consumers to buy the socio-friendly products and leads toward a favorable purchase intention. Past literature agreed with the notion that there exists a positive correlation between determinant of purchase intention (Hsu, Chang, & Yansritakul, 2016). Subjective norm acts as an important and influencing factor in heartening the purchase or buying intention for eco-friendly or green products (Maichum, Parichatnon, & Peng, 2016). Thus, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₃: Subjective norm has a significant positive influence on consumer's intention to buy societal friendly products.

Perceived Behavior Control and Consumer Intention

Perceived behavioral control reflects a particular performance of a behavior possessed by individuals in terms of perceived ease and difficulty. It occurs only if the ability and motivation to perform the behavior exist (Ajzen, 1991). It deals with the consumer's self-confidence while performing buying or purchase behaviors towards green/eco-friendly products or items. Researchers refer perceived behavioral control with respect to environment which include processes like recycling, socio-friendly purchasing and using public transport (Xiong, Li, Ding, & Mo, 2012). It may also comprise consumer's pro-environmental actions leading to buying or purchase intentions (Ertz, Karakas, & Sarigöllü, 2016).

Von Meyer-Höfer et al. (2013) found a strong association between PBC and intention to act pro-environmentally. This in turn transforms environmental intention to actual behavior of consumers to

buy eco-friendly products (Marquart-Pyatt, 2012). Similarly, PBC has been positively associated with the purchase intention of green products (Lu & GURSOY, 2016). Moreover, green hotels, socio-friendly products and organic food suggests that perceived behavior control is positively correlated with buying intention thus creating a pollutant free economy (Maichum, Parichatnon, & Peng, 2016). Thus, we expected PBC to be a strong predictor of consumer intention.

H₄: Perceived behavioral control has a significant positive influence on consumer's intention to buy societal friendly product

Methodology

Sample

The awareness about environment and societal friendly products is very limited in Pakistan. The population of the study included the literate consumers who are aware about environmental products and they are keen to protect environment for future generations. The data were collected from consumers of twin cities (Rawalpindi/Islamabad) by using convenience sampling. 450 questionnaires were distributed and 220 were returned in which 217 were complete questionnaires. The response rate was 48%. The respondents were exposed to four different environmental/societal products. LED bulbs were rated as highest frequency of buying (111) followed by recycled utensils (52), solar panels (49) and portable solar charging station (5). The participants' gender bifurcation was 68% males and 32% females. 151 respondents were holding the Masters degree because we targeted the literate class who were about the term of environmental products.

Procedure

The data were collected in 3 time lags. In time 1, ethical self identity was measured. However, subjective norm, perceived behavioral control, attitude was measured in time 02. Intention to buy environmental friendly products was measured in time 3. Each time lag had 2 months gap.

Instrumentation

The ethical self-identity was measured by using 2 item scales of Shaw and Shiu (2003) with reliability value of .716. Attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control were measured by using the tool developed by Ajzen and Madden (1986) with $\alpha = .740, .762, .897$ respectively. Intention of customers regarding societal friendly products were measured by using tool developed by Chan and Lau (2000) with $\alpha = .926$. The five point Likert scale was used ranging from 1=strongly disagree (SD) AND 5=strongly agree (SA). The value of KMO was .893 with $p = .000$

Results

The results of the study bear the threshold p value which is less than .05. The results of bivariate correlations show that all variables of the study are significantly positively correlated. Ethical self identity was positively correlated with attitude ($r = .372, p < .01$). Subjective norm was positively associated with ethical self identity ($r = .546, p < .01$) and attitude ($r = .727, p < .01$). Perceived behavioral control was significantly positively correlated with ethical self identity ($r = .516, p < .01$), attitude ($r = .860, p < .01$) and subjective norm ($r = .801, p < .01$). Purchase intention also had significant positive correlation with ethical self identity ($r = .367, p < .01$), attitude ($r = .846, p < .01$), subjective norm ($r = .834, p < .01$) and perceived behavioral control ($r = .861, p < .01$).

The demographic variables of the study included age (in years) gender (male = 1, female = 2) and qualifications (Bachelors to PhD). The mediator of the study was attitude which had significant positive correlations with ethical self identity and purchase intention.

Table 2 shows the results hypothesized relationship. Ethical self identity has a significant positive impact on attitude ($p < .01$) toward societal friendly products. 13.5% change in attitude is driven by ethical self identity of the customers. The overall model to predict attitude was significant ($f = 33.410, p < .01$). Ethical self identity was significantly positively correlated with attitude which continued in regression equation ($\beta = .358, p < .01$).

Table 1: Bivariate Correlation of variables

| Correlations | | | | | |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| ESI | 1 | | | | |
| ATT | .372** | 1 | | | |
| SN | .546** | .727** | 1 | | |
| PBC | .516** | .860** | .801** | 1 | |
| PI | .367** | .846** | .834** | .861** | 1 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). N=217

Table 3 gives the results of multiple regressions. Attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control bring 83% change in intention to buy societal friendly products ($R^2 = .831$) with overall model fitness ($F = 348.926, P < .01$). The regression equation of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control is $\beta = .420, .370, .314$ respectively. Thus the hypothesized relation of attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control is accepted.

Table 2: Ethical self identity and Attitude

| | R^2 | F | β | t | P |
|-----------------------|-------|--------|---------|-------|------|
| Ethical self identity | .135 | 33.410 | .358 | 5.783 | .000 |

The bootstrapping method of Preacher and Hayes (2008) was used which is a nonparametric method to generate estimations of direct and indirect effects. Bootstrapping method also assists to get better estimates due to its resampling approach. We have used 5000 bootstrap resamples with 95% confidence interval. The model of mediation was run for analysis.

Table 3: Attitude, subjective norm and PBC to purchase intention

| | R^2 | F | β | t | P |
|-----------------|-------|---------|---------|-------|------|
| Attitude | .831 | 348.926 | .420 | 6.292 | .000 |
| Subjective Norm | | | .370 | 7.670 | .000 |
| PBC | | | .314 | 4.223 | .000 |

Table 4 shows the direct, indirect and total effects and bootstrap results of ethical self identity on intention to buy societal friendly products with attitude as mediator.

The effect of ethical self identity on attitude is .3021 and effect of attitude on intention to buy societal friendly product is .9891 with 95% confidence interval. On the other hand, the direct effect is .0593 and the total effect is .3581 with $p > .05$. The relation between ethical self identity and attitude falls between .1869 and .4149. Hence, the hypothesis relationship between ethical self identity and purchase intention from attitude is fully accepted.

Table 4: Effect of Attitude as Mediator (M) between the ethical self identity and purchase intention

| | Effect of IV on M | Effect of M on DV | Direct Effect | Total effect | Bootstrap Results for indirect effect | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------------------------------|-------|
| | | | | | LL CI | UL CI |
| Ethical Self identity | .3021 | .9891 | .0593 | .3581 | .1869 | .4149 |

Discussion

The results of the study yielded very interesting findings which meets the objectives of the research. The researchers hypothesized that ethical self identity predict the consumer attitude. Results of the study confirmed that if a consumer believes that he is an ethical, his attitude toward buying of societal and environment friendly products will be positive. The results are aligned with the meta analysis of Rise et al. (2010). Rise et al. (2010) predict the role of self identity under the light of theory of planned behavior which confirmed a strong correlation between ethical self identity and intentions. Further they mentioned that self identity is accounted for 9% increase in the intention through attitude, subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. Whereas, in the present study, ethical self identity brought 13% change in consumer

intention. Sparks and Shepherd (1992) also examined the role of green identity and found predictive and independent effect on consumer intentions.

As per the theory of planned behavior, the subjective norm, attitude and perceived behavioral control explains the significant effect toward willingness to buy societal/environmental friendly products. Interestingly, the findings of the current study are aligned with previous results and predict a very strong significant effect on intention to buy societal/environmental friendly products. An individual's favorable attitude toward environment friendly products influences the intention of that person to show a desired behavior (Picazo-Vela, Chou, Melcher, & Pearson, 2010). Marquart-Pyatt and Sandra (2012) found that subjective norm influence green buying intention. Recent researches open the horizon for further search on intention to buy green product innovations (Ertz, Karakas, & Sarigöllü, 2016).

The ethical self identity was predicted with attitude only, as attitude is found to have strong predictor of intention to buy societal friendly products. In previous researches, this relationship is not previously hypothesized. The strong correlation is found between ethical self identity and attitude. The direct effect was also found to be significant. Thus this adds contribution in literature. Perceived behavioral control also found to have significant relationship with intention to buy environmental or societal friendly products. Likewise, Xiong, Li, Ding, and Mo (2012) studied OBC and interestingly found the same results. Ertz, Karakas, and Sarigöllü (2016) also confirm the same findings in their study which comprised consumer's pro-environmental actions leading to buying or purchase intentions von Meyer-Höfer et al. (2013) found a strong association between PBC and intention to act pro-environmentally.

Conclusion and implications

The study aimed to address a very critical knowledge gap by applying the theory of planned behavior to predict attitude as mediator between ethical self identity and consumer intentions to buy societal friendly. Despite of numerous researches in consumer ethics, this area was still questioned. Previously, ethical self identity was studied as background factors which were not a clear indicator of predicting the attitude of consumers. Hence, attitude ensured as mediator to bridge the relation between ethical self identity and consumer intentions. The researchers concluded that ethical consumers positively evaluate the products and they show willingness to buy pro environment products.

The study revealed important managerial implications for the organizations that produce societal/environmental products. While

planning their advertising strategies, companies can focus on the factors which influence the decision making of the customers. Moreover, the positioning of the environmental products should be done by considering the factors of consumers' ethical self identity will strongly predict the buying behavior of the customers.

Limitations and future directions

The present study has few limitations. First, the study's sample was composed of consumers who usually buy environment friendly products. Second, the sample size was small and number of societal friendly products which were mentioned in questionnaire was limited. For researchers, the research opens new doors to predict the buying behavior of consumers by applying the theory of planned behavior. For instance, the future researchers may also study the effect of ethical self identity on subjective norm and perceived behavioral control. Moreover, the industry specific sample of the societal products can also be studied contrasting to the current study which has collected the data from random societal products available in the market. Lastly, the literacy of the customers regarding environmental products can also be studied as moderating variable to predict if literacy strengthens the relationship between attitude and willingness to buy societal friendly products.

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