



Explaining socially responsible consumer behavior:  
A meta-analytic review of theory of planned behavior

Tae-Im Han, Leslie Stoel  
The Ohio State University, USA

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**Introduction** Despite retailer and consumer interest in ethical consumerism, prior research provides limited knowledge about purchase behaviors of socially responsible consumers. The term, socially responsible consumer has been conceptualized rather broadly and its definition varies across studies. The discrepancy in the use of the term and mixed results in previous research accordingly provide narrow understanding on this topic.

The purpose of the study is to systematically review previous studies of socially responsible consumer behavior (SRCB) that apply the theory of planned behavior (TPB) to examine the predictive validity of the model and to identify major determinants of consumers' ethical purchase behaviors. It is among the first to quantitatively aggregate and compare the results from SRCB studies involving a broad range of product types and ethical issues.

**Literature Review** Theory of planned behavior (TPB): Behavioral intention is a function of the following three factors: attitude toward performing the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (PBC) (Ajzen, 1991). TPB has been widely applied by studies in the psychosocial domain (McEachern et al., 2007). In particular, the theory has contributed to the enhancement of the ability to predict a person's intention to perform socially responsible behavior in various settings. Socially Responsible Consumers: Roberts (1993) described a socially responsible consumer as "one who purchases products and services perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or who patronizes businesses that attempt to affect related positive social change" (p. 140).

**Methods** Meta-analysis is conducted to address the following research questions: 1. Which TPB components have stronger relationship with behavioral intention? 2. Are there any moderators that influence the relationships between TPB components? Studies for inclusion were limited to those that contain information on consumers' purchase behavior toward products associated with 2 types of social issues (i.e., environmental protection and support for human rights) within the domain of apparel, food, and hotel/tourism industries. A total of 30 studies reporting results of 33 independent data sets met the selection criteria needed for the analysis.

**Results** 1) *The relative strength of relationship between TPB components*: Purchase intention correlated most strongly with attitude ( $r^+ = .53, p < .001$ ). Subjective norms ( $r^+ = .50, p < .001$ ) also had a strong association with purchase intention and the strength of association was much stronger than that of the PBC-purchase intention relationship ( $r^+ = .39, p < .001$ ). The homogeneity statistics indicated a large variation in the correlations reported in the data sets which encouraged a search for potential moderators.

2) *Moderators that influence the relationships between TPB constructs*: Product/ service type. Subjective norms were most strongly correlated with purchase intention when the study involved

consumers' purchase of apparel products ( $r^+ = .59$ ). This effect size was stronger than that for foods ( $r^+ = .40$ ) and hotel/tourism ( $r^+ = .54$ ). Ethical issue type. Attitude ( $r^+ = .54$ ) and subjective norms ( $r^+ = .51$ ) had much stronger associations with purchase intention when the product contributed to environmental protection than when it involved support for human rights (attitude:  $r^+ = .39$ ; subjective norms:  $r^+ = .37$ ). Study Location. Subjective norms ( $r^+ = .57$ ) and PBC ( $r^+ = .52$ ) correlated with purchase intention most strongly in Asia.

**Discussion & Implications** First of all, the results of this meta-analysis provide evidence that TPB provides a good framework for explaining SRCB. Overall, medium to strong sample-weighted mean correlations were found between purchase intention and predictor variables. Interestingly, the mean correlation of subjective norms-intention was very similar to that of attitude-intention and greatly surpassed the mean correlation of PBC-intention which was in contrast to previous meta-analytic studies. It implies that SRCB may be considerably affected by the social pressure of significant others.

This study also found moderating roles for product type, ethical issue, and culture. For instance, subjective norms-purchase intention relationship was stronger among those who are shopping for apparel products. Because apparel products are high in visual display (Robertson, 1970), purchase of these products may be more affected by others' opinion and expectations than purchase of other products or services. A body of literature addresses the role of apparel products as means of nonverbal communications and as socially significant symbols. They are often used as tools for judgments of social appropriateness affecting perceptions of the wearer's societal roles such as competence (Douglas & Solomon, 1983), and credibility (O'Neal & Lapitsky, 1991). Hence, considering their strong social-symbolic meaning, consumers may greatly rely on group norms during the purchase process of ethical apparel products as they would be credible indicators of determining which products are socially acceptable or unacceptable.

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