Belief formation in ethical consumer groups: an exploratory study

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Introduction

In a recent article in this journal the problem of translating fair trade principles into consumer purchase behaviour was identified and explored (Strong, 1997). Strong (1997) focused on the need to address the people aspect of sustainability, in addition to more “traditional” environmental factors, in order to achieve sustainable advancement. The role of the consumer in achieving a sustainable future, and the consumer commitment required to incorporate such principles into their current lifestyle, was highlighted. The importance placed upon the individual consumer to the future of “ethical” consumerism stresses the need to gain a developed understanding of consumer decision making in this area. The present study begins to address this need.

The dramatic increase in environmental awareness over the past decade (e.g. Brown, 1992; Charter, 1992; Peattie, 1992) has tended to conceal the gradual emergence in the 1990s of a highly principled group of “ethical” consumers who, in addition to being concerned about general environmental issues, are distinguished by their concern for deep-seated problems, such as those of the Third World (e.g. Matthews, 1994; Vaughan, 1993). The growth in ethical consumerism raises the question of how the beliefs underlying these concerns are formed, and exposes the limited insights provided by much existing consumer behaviour research, which focuses on decision making (e.g. Foxall, 1983; Hoyer, 1984) rather than the beliefs themselves. This shortfall exists despite evidence which suggests that choices do not always follow beliefs (e.g. Netemeyer and Bearden, 1992; Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990), underlining the need to examine belief formation more closely, if consumer behaviour is to be better understood.

Existing work on consumer’s environmental awareness provides only limited insight into belief formation. Attention has concentrated on explaining awareness with reference to socio-demographic and personality indicators (e.g. Schlegelmilch et al., 1994; Balderjahn, 1988) and less on factors affecting consumers. The approach used in much of this work has a tendency to concentrate on single issues of concern to the consumer – such as pollution – which in reality are likely to interact in complex ways with other factors of importance to them (e.g. Ramsey and Rickson, 1976).

This paper begins to address this shortfall in behavioural research with reference to the initial findings of a major study concentrating explicitly on the formation of beliefs in ethical consumer groups. This exploratory research adopted a two-stage approach using respondent samples from subscribers to the national magazine, Ethical Consumer. In the first stage, 16 respondents took part in two focus group interviews to explore ethical beliefs and highlight key issues of concern to ethical consumer groups. Fair trade was identified as an issue of particular concern and therefore an important focus for the study (see Barratt Brown, 1993, for a more comprehensive discussion). The second stage used an elicitation questionnaire to explore in greater detail the beliefs of this target population. The paper outlines the results of this research, and discusses the findings within the context of the theory of planned behaviour, in which consumer beliefs play a central role (Ajzen, 1985). Unlike in much previous work, however, recognition is given to the interaction between issues of concern to the consumer. The paper is set out in three sections. The first section reviews the extant literature in this area, to ascertain the potential factors involved in belief formation. The second section then details the methodology of the study. The third section explores the insights gained from the fieldwork to identify those beliefs and referents important to the purchasing of fair trade products. The concluding section relates the findings back to the conceptual framework and
discusses implications for the ongoing more detailed stage of the research. In providing a deeper understanding of ethical consumer groups, the study should provide much needed groundwork for the development of more sensitised marketing strategies for this increasingly important consumer segment.

Factors influencing the formation of ethical beliefs

Despite the increasing concern for ethical issues, comparatively little research has explored this specific phenomenon in depth and within the context of other issues of concern to the consumer. For example, much of the work conducted on environmental consumerism has focused on single issues, such as acid rain (Arcury et al., 1987), recycling (Vining and Ebreo, 1990), and pollution (Ramsay and Rickson, 1976). In reality, it is likely that ethical concerns are more complex and interactive. Moreover, Martin and Simintiras (1996) found that consumers demanded information on environmental concerns, while Burgess et al. (1996) suggest that individuals are confused about environmental issues, and that the way in which information is presented is important to how consumers digest information, highlighting the need to clarify the impact and use of information by ethical consumers.

The literature profiling environmentally conscious members of the public exhibits two distinct approaches:

1. the use of personality measures, such as locus of control, alienation, conservatism and dogmatism (e.g. Balderjahn, 1988; Crosby et al., 1981; Henion and Wilson, 1976; Kinnear et al., 1974); and
2. the use of socio-demographic variables, such as sex, age, education and social class (see Schlegelmilch et al., 1994).

Personality variables have been deemed inappropriate by some researchers because of their inability to explain behaviour itself (Balderjahn, 1988; Hooley and Sanders, 1993; Webster, 1975). Furthermore, Schlegelmilch et al. (1994) found only a very weak relationship between socio-demographics factors and environmental consciousness. This seemingly limited influence of socio-demographic factors may be explained by the fact that “environmental concern is becoming the socially accepted norm” (Schwepker and Cornwell, 1991, p. 85). It is probably now inappropriate to expect environmental attitudes to be reflected clearly in socio-demographic characteristics. Despite claims that ethical consumers can be profiled in this way (Wehrmeyer, 1992), this is a position which has been contested (Barratt Brown, 1993). Arguably, it would be more fruitful to explore the formation of their ethical beliefs, as a fundamental first stage in obtaining a richer understanding of consumer choice.

Research on ethical consumers has highlighted their growing significance as a group (Matthews, 1994; Vaughan, 1993), but does little to provide a deeper comprehension of this groups’ ethical beliefs. This same problem is reflected in models of consumer behaviour which tend to over-simplify influences on buyer behaviour (Howard and Sheth, 1969; Engel et al., 1968; Nicosia, 1966). These models depict the consumer rationally and fail to explore how beliefs influence purchasing decisions made in advance of product evaluation, thereby generally underplaying the importance of the initial stages in decision making. Consumer beliefs are, however, more central to other models, such as Ajzen and Fishbein’s theories of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980) and planned behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985), as detailed in Figure 1. However, these models only explore beliefs in so far as they attempt to correlate influencing variables with behaviour. They fail to examine the processes and beliefs underlying consumer choices. It is not surprising, therefore, that these models have been criticised on the grounds that knowledge of an individual’s attitude will be a good predictor of their behaviour (Bagozzi and Warshaw, 1990; Netemeyer and Bearden, 1991). Only a weak relationship has between attitude and behaviour, for instance, been demonstrated in the environmental and social marketing literature (Gill et al., 1986; Rothschild, 1979). In the light of such findings, Schlegelmilch et al. (1996) have called for an investigation of how environmental attitudes – deemed to stem from beliefs – are formed. As Figure 1 reveals, the TRA/TPB can be used as a valuable conceptual framework within which to explore behavioural beliefs and evaluation of those beliefs for insight into attitude formation, but this existing emphasis would be usefully complemented by exploring the formation of the beliefs themselves.

There is, therefore, a critical need to look beyond simple relationships between discrete variables and behaviour, to examine the link between consumer thought and action/inaction more deeply. While the Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) models consider behavioural and normative beliefs individually as having an ultimate impact on behaviour, they fail to address the formation of these behavioural beliefs, neglecting the potential role of normative others in their actual formation. Insufficient consideration is also
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The link between beliefs and behaviour is central to the TRA/TPB in a way which is similar to the connection which means-end analysis attempts to draw between the values of consumers and the consequences of their choices (Gengler and Reynolds, 1995; Reynolds and Whittlark, 1995; Reynolds and Gutman, 1988). Such a view can be applied to ethical consumption, where values very clearly drive behaviour, and particular product attributes are seen to aid a desired outcome or value. The multitude of ethical issues make consumption complex, and the view that positive choices can and will always be made is, perhaps, overly simplistic. Indeed, Ajzen (1985) has acknowledged that an "end" can only be achieved with the available "means", that is, through control over behaviour. The shortcomings of the multi-attribute models of consumer behaviour, particularly the TPB could be, arguably, significantly improved with a more detailed understanding of belief formation. The important methodological implications of this conclusion are that there is a need for a combination of qualitative research methods to provide and enrich the surface connections suggested in the inherently quantitative approach defined by the TPB.

Methodology

Given the limited insights provided by the literature into ethical consumerism, focus groups were deemed an effective means of exploratory data collection, as relatively little is known about the phenomenon of interest (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). Such an approach is considered necessary to explore how and when ethical beliefs are brought to bear on particular issues or principles important to the consumer, and as a means of generating an appropriate focus for the study – fair trade in grocery purchasing. An elicitation questionnaire was used in the following stage in order to ascertain important behavioural and normative beliefs and gain insight into influences on beliefs specific to fair trade, while giving recognition to the need to consider fair trade within the context of other ethical concerns. The nature of the "ethical" research focus necessitated the use of an accentuated population, thus a purposive sample of "ethical" consumers was obtained from a national database of subscribers to the Ethical Consumer magazine. The importance of this particular magazine lies in the range of ethical issues considered, which helps overcome bias towards any specific issue.

Focus groups

A sample of 16 “ethical” consumers split into two focus groups was used to explore the ethical beliefs of the target population. A protocol of questions was used in the focus group discussions, developed in accordance with established guidelines (Krueger, 1988). Sessions were relatively unstructured to encourage participants to raise any aspect of the topic considered important. This "looseness" of structure has been noted as a disadvantage of this method, in that, for instance, the focus group process does not expedite the generation of a list of attributes (Claxton et al., 1980), and the lack of structure may also leave participants without a sense of completion and accomplishment, thus causing respondent dissatisfaction (Van de Ven and Delbecq, 1974). These disadvantages were confronted in this study by the administration of a short questionnaire at the close of each focus group interview; this was designed to clarify the ethical issues of concern to individual respondents and their importance, easing the identification of a study focus. Each discussion was tape recorded and observations were made by an impartial observer. Focus groups were fully transcribed. Analysis of the focus groups highlighted both the issue of behavioural control and the complexity of ethical
consumption; underlining the relevance of the TPB as an appropriate conceptual framework for the study.

**Elicitation questionnaire**
The elicitation questionnaire was constructed as outlined by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980). This questionnaire was sent out in two mailings to Ethical Consumer subscribers in Manchester and Birmingham. Initially 118 questionnaires were sent out, obtaining a total of 27 useable responses. A second mailing of 100 questionnaires was used to supplement this response, leading to a total of 55 useable questionnaires. The questionnaire was used to obtain important behavioural and normative beliefs, and control factors, specific to the purchase of fair trade products. In addition, initial insights were gained into factors arousing fair trade awareness, while probing other important ethical concerns and belief-influencing variables.

**Data analysis**
Qualitative data was analysed using the computerised qualitative coding package Nud*ist. In recent years, interest has grown in the use of computers to aid the analysis of textual qualitative data (Catterall, 1996; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Kelle, 1995; Weitzman and Miles, 1995). Nud*ist allows a systematic and efficient manipulation of the textual data, however, as with manual coding, interpretation is still required on the part of the researcher. The data was aggregated into discrete themes, which were amplified with reference to specific examples from the body of the text. Figure 2 demonstrates the main categories revealed through this process, and provides a framework for discussion in the next section of the paper.

**Findings and discussion**
This section of the paper provides a descriptive analysis of both the focus groups and the questionnaire. The coding categories drawn from the qualitative analysis highlights:
- ethical issues raised by respondents;
- information and normative influences;
- behavioural control variables which impact on an individual’s actions; and
- the feelings experienced by ethical consumers.

These will be discussed in turn.

**Ethical issues**
Analysis of the focus groups revealed the existence of a number of “established” concerns important to ethical consumers. These are issues which respondents have been concerned about over the longer term, and are central to their decision making. For example, one respondent noted:

> It’s become so much of a habit now, you pick up what you know you agree with, and that’s that, you don’t really look anywhere else.

Other examples of established concerns included health, which was very much an initial concern for many people. However, health was often linked to other stated ethical issues; indeed in the questionnaire some respondents linked health with the purchase of fair trade products, highlighting the danger in examining ethical concerns in isolation. In the case of one interviewee, the issue of vegetarianism has been important for so long that it, “just is not a decision any more”; indeed for many, their vegetarian stance only became apparent within the discussion of other concerns. Such habitual behaviour over time has also been found in recycling behaviour (Burgess et al., 1995).

The importance of linkages between ethical concerns was apparent throughout the discussions. One interviewee noted that:

> ... By making a move on one issue, everybody will be coming from different angles ... you know the whole thing about us being part of a creation which is interlinked means that you can’t get away from other issues.

This same view was reiterated for many issues, where initial or established concerns have tended to lead individuals into other areas. Hence, it was important to select an issue for the focus of the study which was more recent, and at the forefront of their minds as consumers; fair trade was identified as the principal issue of concern to this group, and was in keeping with other findings (e.g. Mintel, 1994). Although fair trade could be readily singled out as an ethical study focus, it was in no way an issue considered in isolation. The linkages
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Influences
The main factors influencing ethical consumer beliefs related to a combination of the effect of information sources and normative factors. The effect of information related in the first instance to the quantity received by respondents. For instance, in terms of their own subscription to the Ethical Consumer magazine, one respondent noted:

I got to hear about the magazine through the animal rights movement ... I was led in, like you ... [I was] unaware of what companies are up to in other areas. I was totally unaware of the “Nestlé issue”, for example, until I got the magazine. I think you just kind of lead into different areas, from the information that you gather.

This particular response highlights the importance of information in helping to form ethical beliefs, and serves to support findings from earlier research (e.g. Strong, 1997; Burgess et al., 1995). Contrary to suggestions by Sorell and Hendry (1994) that consumers may not be holistic in their ecological behaviour, in ethical consumption this response highlights an awareness of aggregate corporate activity. Indeed, the acquisition of information led to some individuals feeling “involved” and “empowered”, although in some cases it led to tensions within the individual when making choices. One respondent summed up such feelings:

I have been subscribing to the magazine since issue one. When I first got it, I went at it all fire and gusto. At the end of the day every shopping trip was just an absolute nightmare, because there is just no way that you can totally avoid multinational companies, there is no way you can totally avoid companies that are not doing something to somebody or something out there in the world.

This quote underlines the constraints placed on respondents and reinforces Burgess et al.’s conclusion of the need to target information “locally”, making it more manageable to address important concerns. Indeed, the issue of information overload has been highlighted elsewhere (e.g. Keller and Staellin, 1987; Jacoby, 1984). Information which does not recognise these limitations on the individual can result in negative feelings; one respondent summed up such feelings in saying that “you cannot cope with it”. Despite these negative feelings, the acquisition of information on ethical issues was still regarded as imperative, as it was viewed as essential to balancing complex ethical concerns.

Two related sources of influence on ethical consumers was available literature and their interaction with ethical organisations. As revealed above, subscription to the Ethical Consumer magazine was vital as a trusted information source, and as a vehicle for change. A respondent pointed out:

I think the whole thing about Ethical Consumer is just about making us conscious, so that we make conscious decisions for change.

The importance of the Ethical Consumer magazine as an information source was also born out in the questionnaire findings. Other magazines, such as New Internationalist were deemed important along with other literatures and ethical organisations, both in terms of stimulating initial awareness of the fair trade issue and of the Ethical Consumer magazine itself. This finding highlights the effectiveness of these sources in generating ethical awareness and leading individuals into other issues. The importance of ethical organisations was also apparent from the vast majority of questionnaire respondents who are members of and/or who subscribe to ethical organisations and journals.

Finally, a combination of labelling and advertising were additional sources of information for participants. However, with the exception of fair trade products, where information provided was deemed informative and involving, labelling generally was considered far from satisfactory. The importance of labelling is perhaps not surprising given the increasing concentration in the retail sector, which has tended to reduce personal interactions and information exchange. Indeed, Wandel and Bugge (1996) found that although food labels were perceived as difficult to understand, many consumers continued to make use of them. Findings from the current study revealed that information is very important to the ethical consumer and dissatisfaction with present labelling appeared to be closely related to their distrust of large companies. Indeed, this distrust was echoed in the area of advertising, when it was noted by a respondent that:

The thing is ... we actually get a huge amount of information from the advertising industry, but they just digest it for us and give it to us ... we have to go out and find out our own information, because an informed consumer is not something that the advertising industry is trying to build.

Consumer views such as these have important implications for organisations, particularly when existing consumer corporate perceptions were found to affect how
environmental advertising messages were perceived (Davis, 1994).

Labelling and advertising were not specifically mentioned in the questionnaire, they may not be considered valid or reliable information sources by ethical consumers until improvements have occurred. However, the retailer was noted as an information source by some of the respondents and some stated that they first became aware of the fair trade issue from seeing such products. This presently small number is not surprising given the still limited availability of fair trade products in the mainstream multiples. However, this shows that the potential to create awareness through product availability does exist.

The above discussion highlights the importance of other broader information sources in the establishment of ethical beliefs. As stated previously, such influences are neglected in the TPB, which recognises normative and control variables, but fails to address how these variables may impact actual beliefs. The discussion will now turn its attention to these elements.

Normative others in an individual’s social sphere were found to play a role in influencing and informing behavioural beliefs. Often, however, this sharing of information was only effective where concern for ethical issues was held in common. As the following responses reveal, focus group respondents varied in the levels of support for ethical issues given by others, as illustrated in the following two quotations:

I never buy Nestle products, unless by accident, and if I do one of my family usually say, “what are you buying that for”; and will even refuse to eat it.

If I mentioned what I just said at the moment to the bulk of my friends, who I consider good friends, they would think I was “off the planet”. You know, they just are not interested in considering it [ethical issues]. I do not know why and yet they are friends I consider good friends, and know well in other ways, but it is as if there are barriers there, and we are not going to talk about these things. We will just live out life with what is available to us and that is that.

Those individuals who receive little or no support for their ethical views from others appeared to be generally frustrated when trying to inform others, or did not wish to discuss such issues for fear of ridicule. Indeed “ridicule” and “attacking” behaviour from others was a significant issue, particularly with regard to having to justify one's ethical stance to others. As described by one respondent:

What else frustrates me is people, I don’t ask people to justify what coffee they drink, or the fact that they eat meat, or whatever, but people continually ask me. And try to pick holes in what I do.

Important referents were mainly supportive of questionnaire respondents’ wish to purchase fair trade products. This is interesting given the level of negativity some focus group respondents felt was levied at them. In discussing others it was clear that support was important, both from the level of emotion (anger, frustration, disappointment) felt towards others, and for purposes of self-motivation, given the often complex nature of “ethical” consumption. Indeed, the reality that individuals act in a social setting is supported elsewhere (Burgess et al., 1995).

Religion was mentioned relatively frequently among questionnaire respondents, in terms of positive normative influence and in creating awareness of fair trade. The impact of religion on particular beliefs is apparent in other areas also, for example, Glenon and Joseph (1993) found religion to be a factor in attitudes towards homosexuals with AIDS. In the focus groups in this study, however, a religious presence was less apparent. One respondent stated that their faith led them into vegetarianism, however, other religious references were voicing a disappointment at the lack of concern for ethical issues within the church. In particular, one respondent pointed out:

I work for the Church of Scotland, and you would assume that the church would be highly motivated, but yet there are loads of people there who have got little interest in these things.

This difference in opinion between focus group and questionnaire respondents could be due to the fair trade focus taken in the questionnaire, an area in which religious groups are more involved. Indeed, Traidcraft and Christian Aid are stated sources of influence and information among questionnaire respondents.

Other normative beliefs stated in the questionnaire included retailers, from a favourable and unfavourable viewpoint. Retailers which were stockists of fair trade products were perceived positively, obviously linking with fair trade producers being a positive normative influence. Multinationals tended to be viewed negatively, and this was demonstrated through campaigning behaviour, such as boycotting and letter writing. Supermarkets were poorly perceived, particularly with regard to their power over how food is produced, what products are stocked and their price. One respondent felt:
That’s the main problem with supermarkets, they’re not actually interested in the alternative ... even just to buy soap powder, even when they do have a good one, they never stock it for that long, they’re not interested. We’re not ideal consumers, we are wrong consumers, they don’t want us.

There was a belief that ethical issues can get “lost” in the environment of large organisations. One respondent felt that large companies have an ability to “normalise” and “control”. In the example of a supermarket, where ethical views are less typical, it could be argued that respondents’ views become less acute in this environment. Particular feelings of discomfort and guilt were held by two focus group respondents who possessed supermarket loyalty cards, in the words of one of these respondents:

I hate Safeway, but I shop there, I have an ABC card there, which I hate myself even more for having.

This guilt was due to an annoyance for “getting sucked in” by the supermarkets, while believing that such organisations are unsupportive of the ethical consumer. A deeper understanding of these specific beliefs will be vital to organisations wishing to appeal to these more highly principled consumer groups.

Action
Earlier in the discussion it was revealed that where choices are available, ethical criteria can, in some instances, be fairly habitual in decision making. However, like other consumers, ethical consumers also have many “traditional” credentials on their shopping list, as the quote below demonstrates, the problem of behavioural control can arise when these two sets of credentials conflict:

I would say that always, no matter how many other issues I may think about it always comes down to the cost, ‘cause I’m living on a student grant and loans and things. So I would like to be able to consider more when I buy things, but it just comes down to what I can afford.

Cost is an obvious barrier for consumers, ethical or otherwise, however, where price and ethical concerns conflict a decision was often made to purchase a restricted number of ethical products. Price was of less significance to questionnaire respondents, probably because the higher prices were an aid to producers. Price-sensitive respondents from the focus groups demonstrated that the purchase of fair trade products would often outweigh this traditional concern. Problems with price can, however, lie in the perception that ethical products are more expensive. This may be a backlash from many of the environmental products during the 1980s, which were sold at a price premium for reduced quality. Indeed, recognising this problem, Collis (1997) highlighted the often comparable price tags of “ethical” and “non-ethical” alternatives.

Price was by no means an isolated issue, indeed, most problematic among both focus group and questionnaire respondents was availability of ethical alternatives. This finding is perhaps not surprising given the paucity of fair trade and other ethical products in major multiples. Purchasing these products outwith mainstream outlets can be constrained by locality and time available to shop around. This raised for individuals the issue of product and store choice. Respondents felt that supermarkets were uninterested in the ethical consumer and, where ethical alternatives had existed, many had since been delisted. This was not only a limitation of supermarkets, but also of local shops, where a decision may have been taken to go there on the basis of locality, only to find availability of ethical choices severely lacking. Product quality and information were also noted in both research phases. In the main, quality was regarded as an advantage in the purchase of fair trade products. Information was regarded as important in aiding ethical purchases, and some respondents stated this as a limiting factor in their ethical purchasing.

Despite suggestions that a particular purchase implies support for an organisation (Sorell and Hendry, 1994), the above factors demonstrate how in many instances an ideal choice may not be made. Indeed, the complexity of ethical consumption highlights the importance of behavioural control, and the appropriate use of the TPB as a framework for study. Further, this complexity of choice is demonstrated below in adopted “purchasing strategies”, and is summed up effectively by the Ethical Consumer (1989), “You do not necessarily condone or encourage a system simply by using it”.

It was also very apparent among ethical consumers that there was a desire to enact change. This common goal resulted in the adoption of two distinct purchasing strategies:

I consciously bought from them (supermarket), knowing at the same time that I was buying less from the sources I had previously used. But, the point was if I could help or support the supermarkets in carrying those lines then more people, people who never pass through the alternative shops, more people would see them and might try them, because they are available, there is no chance of them picking them up if they are just not on the shelf. And if my contribution could help to
Central to these feelings appear to be control problems which mean a greater effort is required on the part of the ethical consumer if ethical credentials are to be considered in addition to other product attributes. Experience of these difficulties, and the potential to get disheartened, can result in an awareness of their limitations with regard to issues addressed. One respondent felt:

It sounds as if we’re all negative, and we have to avoid this … and we’re weighed down by this conscience … I don’t feel as if I am sacrificing anything … [is it] such a terrible thing that I’ve got to have unquilted toilet paper and I do not drink Nescafé.

The difficulties inherent in ethical consumption mean that many ethical consumers desire support from others, support which was not always forthcoming. Lack of support from significant others, is a potential factor in feelings of isolation, however, isolation was not always viewed negatively. One respondent emphasised:

If you feel isolated, because in a way it’s almost like being an evangelist to a particular cause … When people see somebody doing something different, and they are doing it different for a reason, and while the initial thing is to ridicule, or make fun of you, or whatever, I think very often there is a kind of drip, drip, thing when people recognise there’s somebody else who does something else that’s different. And there’s actually maybe a point where they admit to it, I’ll try that or whatever. I think that’s a very important campaigning element we’ve got, even for being in an isolated situation, at least you know people recognise you’re doing something different.

Such a view is very important in the goal for change, and again highlights the strategic thinking apparent among ethical consumers.

Many respondents felt that they are having to fight against the values of a society which pressures individuals to consume in excess. Among “ethical” consumers was a feeling of “responsibility to each other” as we “do not live in glorious isolation”. Indeed conscience was a driving force behind questionnaire respondents’ behavioural beliefs. These feelings reveal a concern for consumption levels, and a general agreement that consumption needs to be reduced. However, it was felt that to reduce consumption lessens power in the marketplace, given an individual’s inability to then vote via their “purse strings”. The discussion has revealed that respondents wish to enact change by consuming, and thus changing the status quo from within. This responds to the earlier question raised by Sorell and Hendry (1994), and links in with their suggestion “that ethical consumerists can respond by showing that there is such a
thing as sustainable consumption”. Among ethical consumers was a view that despite some feelings of isolation among important others, the knowledge exists that there is a collective group of ethical consumers, however small, all working for change.

### Implications and conclusions

This exploratory study has provided useful initial insights into the neglected area of ethical beliefs. Existing consumer behaviour research has tended to focus on decision making, to the neglect of the formative stages underlying actual choices. The irrefutable importance of these initial stages in decision making is evident from factors outlined by the study as being influential to ethical beliefs. Additionally, the study has emphasised the simplicity of previous research on the environmental consumer by revealing the intricate interactions which exist between ethical issues themselves, and more traditional considerations of importance to consumers. This complexity highlights the often simplistic approach adopted by existing models of consumer behaviour, which endorse a deterministic view of decision making, neglecting the often complex relationships, and constraints surrounding the link between thought and action.

To begin to address these complex consumer processes the study used the TPB as a conceptual framework. The insights generated from this study have helped clarify the deterministic way in which beliefs and behaviour are depicted by the theory. Figure 3 attempts to summarise the preceding discussion and clarify these relationships as a simple conceptual framework. At the core of the framework is the deterministic view of consumer decision making adopted by the multi-attribute models of consumer behaviour. Encircling these core elements is the development of concerns over time, and the distinction between those concerns “established” in decision making, and the evolvement of more recent considerations. Feeding into the first stage of consumer choice are the various normative and broader environmental factors which impact beliefs. The significance of these variables has been highlighted and, as the framework reveals, through their influence on this initial stage these factors have a critical impact on the latter stages of decision making. As depicted by Ajzen (1985) control factors have an important impact on purchase intention, however, further, the rational choices suggested by TPB are simplistic in the light of purchasing strategies adopted by ethical consumers. Often as a direct result of control problems consumers may act in conflict of their beliefs in order to attain a longer-term goal ± change. All of these elements in decision making give rise to emotional responses among consumers, and these can be seen as encompassing the choice process. In short, the influencing factors surrounding beliefs play a significant role in actual behaviour. This

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**Figure 3**

Belief formation: a conceptual framework

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effect occurs directly through purchasing strategies, which stem from influences on ethical beliefs, and a desire to act on those formed beliefs, and indirectly, as these broader “information” sources impact beliefs and perceived behavioural control. These various relationships are complex, develop over time, invariably affect consumer sensitivities, and clearly deserve more detailed attention.

This study has provided important initial insights into ethical beliefs and their formation. The issues identified will have important implications for the development of advanced communications and “sensitised” marketing strategies directed at this increasingly significant segment. A larger sample of “ethical” consumers, however, is prudent to assess the stability of, and to further these important findings. A survey of this nature is currently under way by one of the authors. This survey will provide a statistical basis from which to derive broader inferences and generalisations on the identified areas imperative to a deeper understanding of belief formation in consumer decision making.

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