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Why People Don't Take their Concerns about Fair Trade to the Supermarket: The Role of Neutralisation

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ABSTRACT. This article explores how neutralisation can explain people's lack of commitment to buying Fair Trade (FT) products, even when they identify FT as an ethical concern. It examines the theoretical tenets of neutralisation theory and critically assesses its applicability to the purchase of FT products. Exploratory research provides illustrative examples of neutralisation techniques being used in the FT consumer context. A conceptual framework and research propositions delineate the role of neutralisation in explaining the attitude-behaviour discrepancies evident in relation to consumers' FT purchase behaviour, providing direction for further research that will generate new knowledge of consumers' FT purchase behaviour and other aspects of ethical consumer behaviour.

KEY WORDS: attitude-behaviour gap, ethical consumerism, ethical decision-making, fair trade purchase, neutralisation

Introduction

Why don't more consumers who profess to be sympathetic with the aims of the Fair Trade (FT) movement buy FT products at all or more regularly[1]? Cowe and Williams (2000) and Bird and Hughes (1997) both confirm that most consumers share various ethical concerns including FT, yet few translate their concerns into actual behaviour. When faced with a clear choice between fairly traded goods and mainstream products, do those who make ‚less ethical' choices experience dissonance? And if so, how do they restore equilibrium without changing their attitudes? This article addresses these questions by applying neutralisation theory (Sykes and Matza, 1957). Neutralisation describes a mechanism that facilitates behaviour that is either norm violating or in contravention of expressed attitudes. When they neutralise, individuals soften or eliminate the impact that their norm violating behaviour might have upon their self-concept and social relationships (Grove et al., 1989). It has been widely applied in a number of contexts but little work has been done in the field of consumer behaviour. Yet, understanding the processes by which individuals cope with dissonance in ethical consumption contexts is important for scholars and practitioners. For scholars, accounting for processes that explain attitude-behaviour discrepancies promises to bring further insights to current understanding of ethical decision-making; neutralisation may prove to be an important moderating variable to incorporate into extant theoretical models. For practitioners, appreciation of why attitudes do not always translate into behaviour will give direction to marketing and management practices, and particularly marketing communications, intended to counter neutralisations that various consumer segments use.

The article begins by examining the core tenets of neutralisation theory and discussing the applicability of the concept to ethical consumer behaviour in general and to FT purchase in particular. Evidence from an exploratory qualitative study is then provided after which an outline for a theoretical framework that integrates the neutralisation construct with existing explanations of ethical consumer behaviour and FT purchase is given. This framework leads to the generation of research propositions aiming to address the issue of non-purchase of FT products by consumers who recognise it to be an ethical concern.

What is neutralisation?

Social norms play a crucial role in guiding ethical behaviour (e.g. Davies et al., 2002). When social

norms are not internalised to the degree that they guide behaviour under all circumstances, consumers may develop coping strategies to deal with the dissonance that they experience. In 1957 Sykes and Matza published their seminal article on juvenile delinquency. They suggested that rather than learning moral imperatives, values or attitudes standing in a complete opposition to those of his/her society, the delinquent learns a set of justifications or rationalisations, i.e. the techniques of neutralisation, which can insulate him/her from self-blame and the blame of others. This perspective can be attributed to the flexibility of the normative systems: rather than being categorical imperatives, social norms or values are "qualified guides for action, limited in their applicability in terms of time, place, persons, and social circumstances" (Sykes and Matza, 1957, p. 666). For example, the moral injunction against killing does not apply in time of war. Thus, the delinquent learns patterns of thought that help him/her to remain committed to the normative system and qualify his/her actions as "acceptable" if not "right".

Sykes and Matza (1957) identified five categories – labelled ‚neutralisation techniques' – that describe the different rationalisations that people apply to their norm-violating behaviour. These techniques, adapted to the consumer context by Strutton et al. (1994, p. 254), are listed below along with generic examples:

(1) Denial of responsibility (DoR): argument that one is not personally accountable for the norm-violating behaviour because factors beyond one's control are operating; e.g. "It's not my fault, I had no other choice".
(2) Denial of Injury (DoI): contention that personal misconduct is not really serious because no party directly suffered as a result of it; e.g. "What's the big deal in stealing it, nobody will miss it?"
(3) Denial of Victim (DoV): blame for personal actions countered by arguing the violated party deserved whatever happened; e.g. "It's their fault; if they had been fair with me, I would not have done it".
(4) Condemning the condemners (CtC): deflection of accusations of misconduct by pointing out that those who condemn engage in similarly disapproved activities; e.g. "It's a joke they should find fault with me after the rip-offs they have engineered".
(5) Appeal to higher loyalties (AtHL): argument that norm-violating behaviour is the result of an attempt to actualise some higher order ideal or value; e.g. "To some what I did may appear wrong, but I did it for my family".

It is important to note that, while these techniques may be viewed as following unethical behaviour, ultimately they can precede it, and make unethical behaviour possible. That is, once successfully internalised, they can truly become neutralising devices (Grove et al., 1989) as opposed to post behavioural rationalisations.

Since its formulation by Sykes and Matza, neutralisation theory has been one of the most widely known and frequently cited theories in the sociology of deviance (Minor, 1981; Copes, 2003). Examples of its application include a variety of juvenile (e.g. Ball, 1966; Minor, 1981; Costello, 2000) as well as adult deviance contexts (e.g. Levi, 1981; Eliason and Dodder, 1999; Fox, 1999). It has also been the subject of more intuitive applications including the victimisation of battered wives (Ferraro and Johnson, 1983), genocide and the Holocaust (Alvarez, 1997), organisational rule enforcing (Fershing, 2003) and the management of the "temporary deviant" label of pageant mothers in the United States (Heltsley and Calhoun, 2003).

Neutralisation and the purchase of FT products

Strutton et al. (1994) found that, in consumer contexts, otherwise principled consumers tend to rationalise their non-normative behaviour by appealing to the techniques of neutralisation. Other scholars have applied neutralisation to consumer behaviour, but research in this domain remains limited (Strutton et al., 1994, 1997; Mitchell and Chan, 2002; Rosenbaum and Kuntze, 2003). Most of the extant studies have considered quite extreme illegal behaviour and were based on one-off survey instruments, a methodological approach that has been described as problematic for investigating ethical behaviour (e.g. Crane, 1999) and also for validating the theoretical tenets of neutralisation theory in particular (see e.g. Fritsche, 2005).

There are strong reasons to believe that the need to justify/rationalise one's own behaviour spans all sorts of consumer activities, as long as they involve the negligence of a personal ethical concern. Experimental studies by Bersoff (2001) and Fritsche (2003) have both confirmed the applicability of neutralisation to relatively small – rather than clearly deviant – ethical breaches i.e. failure to declare small overpayment and drinking from non-recyclable cans respectively.

Chatzidakis et al. (2004) explored the applicability of neutralisation theory in a variety of consumer contexts. They found evidence that neutralisation techniques are readily employed in clearly deviant behaviours, such as shoplifting, but also in more normatively flexible contexts, such as recycling and buying FT products. Each of these contexts varies considerably, however, and there is a need for discrete treatment with context specific conceptualisation and research.

Ethical consumption choices that are more normatively flexible have been described as behaviours guided by *personal* moral beliefs and individual ethical standards (e.g. Crane and Matten, 2004; Cherrier, 2005) rather than group or social norms that apply under any circumstances. Consequently, these are the contexts where attitudinally-incongruent behaviours should be most pervasive.

This article builds on our earlier research by probing more deeply into the use of neutralisation in the specific context of FT. It elaborates the conceptual contribution of neutralisation to ethical decision-making by examining its role as a moderating variable in relation to established models. Finally, the article integrates the neutralisation construct with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991) – one of the more testable models that has been applied to ethical decision-making – and develops research propositions to facilitate empirical testing of the role of neutralisation in consumer purchase of FT goods.

Preliminary evidence: Justifications for not buying FT products

The preliminary evidence presented here was based on a qualitative inquiry intended to examine how readily individuals use neutralisation-style arguments in the context of supporting FT and to uncover the range of justifications that they employ. When exploring the application of existing theoretical constructs there is a deductive aspect to the research, but qualitative approaches allow participants to recount stories, examples and scenarios that illuminate the nature of those constructs within the particular context (Patton, 1990; Mason, 1996). This interplay of induction and deduction principles is particularly valued when eliciting neutralisation techniques (Fritsche and Mayrhofer, 2001), as it can also indicate the accessibility of arguments in people's mind, which is an important characteristic for effective neutralisation (Fritsche, 2003). Accordingly, qualitative approaches have been widely adopted for exploratory inquiries into other applications of neutralisation theory (e.g. Ferraro and Johnson, 1983; Hazani, 1991; Byers et al., 1999; Gauthier, 2001).

In order to be able to discuss experiences of dissonance in relation to FT it was important that sample members were familiar with the basic principles of the FT movement and felt some degree of empathy with it and these filters were used during sample recruitment. A convenience sample was recruited by asking visitors to a FT Roadshow (promotional event) at a university in central England to participate in the research. There were a total of eighteen informants; seven males and eleven females. Fourteen of the informants were staff or students at the university and four were in full-time employment in other organisations. The age range of the sample was from 20 to 50 years, with a bias towards the lower ages.

Face to face interviews were conducted to explore ethical concerns relevant to FT, the occurrence of attitude-behaviour discrepancies in this domain, experiences of dissonance and whether individuals use neutralisation-style arguments in relation to their FT consumption. Of particular concern for the research design was the inherent problem of the perceived social desirability of opinions in relation to ethical issues (Crane, 1999; Nancarrow et al., 2001), the unattractiveness of favouring more selfish goals over socially-oriented goals (e.g. Davies et al., 2002) and the association between neutralisation, self-presentation needs and personal importance of FT values (see Fisher and Katz, 2000). For these reasons, interviews were preferred to focus groups to avoid the social pressures of conforming to perceived

norms and following the lead of dominant members of the group (e.g. Malhotra, 2004). To address the social influence of the interviewer, research participants were prompted to talk about being a FT consumer both in a projective/indirect manner (see Fisher, 1993) and with reference to themselves. Projections were explored for ‚other people' known to the participant as well as unspecified ‚others'.

Discussion centred on individuals' (and others') attitudes towards FT and the interviewer probed participants to talk about their own (and others') behaviour as the issue arose naturally in the course of the conversation. None of the participants was challenged to rationalise incongruent attitudes and behaviour, but nearly all of them did so. Interviews lasted between 20 and 75 min.

Audio recordings were made of the interviews, which were later transcribed. As the study aimed to explore the use of the five techniques of neutralisation, the approach was deductive in the sense that the basic coding themes relating to these techniques were predetermined. In the coding process it was apparent that the framing of statements was an important determinant of how the data should be coded. For example, informants often referred to price/cost when explaining their behaviour; typical quotes were "I always go for the cheapest things" and "I would really buy more FT products if they were not excessively priced". Of these two examples, the first would be coded AtHL because it refers to the individual's own priorities, whereas the second was coded DoR because the person is suggesting that their behaviour is contingent on the behaviour of a third party, the retailer. Illustrative examples of arguments associated with each of the five neutralisation techniques are presented below to give an indication of devices that are used in the FT context.

(1) Denial of responsibility (DoR):

> "It so much more expensive anyway, and to be honest money is so tight at the moment..."
> "I don't think that supermarkets or shops in general, actively promote these things..."
> "I think I would become more passionate about FT products if I had realised the difference that exists when a product is FT and when it's not...but, I think people don't know enough, they are not given much explanation..."

(2) Denial of Injury (DoI) (or denial of benefit):

> "I wouldn't feel bad for not buying FT...in my view, the causes of unfair trade are systemic... (by buying FT) I'm not doing anything that contributes to an improved trading system".
> "I think, the problem is too big to be dealt at the level of the consumer... it seems to me that the minority of people that care about FT aren't going to overcome the bigger problem...which is about all those organizations and subsidies, signing agreements".

(3) Condemning the condemners (CtC):

> "I think that the issue of FT puts a lot of burden of fairness to the consumer... for example, you've got COSTA coffee, where if you look at the menu, it says in small print letters that you can request any of our coffees in FT...where maybe it should be the other way round? If a person wants to save some money they could request non-FT coffee". (CtC and DoR).

(4) Appeal to higher loyalties (AtHL):

> "...to be honest, I like trying different things...and I am not very keen on buying the same on and on".
> "FT might be a consideration, but in general...when I go shopping in Sainsbury's I look for the cheapest and nearest thing to me".
> "I've thought some times that I should be more ethical in what I buy...but part of me is quite lazy actually".
> "...and then we have this coffee which is FT and whatever, but this coffee is horrible! And it's supposed to be better coffee, isn't it? I don't like this coffee so I never buy it".

Grove et al. (1989) note that some techniques are more heavily used than others in particular ethically challenging situations. With respect to FT, appealing to higher loyalties (AtHL), denial of responsibility (DoR) and denial of injury (DoI; or what was manifest as Denial of Benefit) were the more widely used neutralisation techniques, while there was only tenuous reference to CtC and none of the arguments referred to denial of victim (DoV). The informants denied responsibility on the grounds that they were uninformed, that distribution and promotion of FT products is inadequate or FT goods are too costly.

Denial of injury (or of benefit) was based on notions such as that FT is just a marketing ploy or a small scale initiative which only marginally contributes to the welfare of a minority of Third World producers, if at all, and which does not lead to a systemic change in trading systems. External attribution was evident in both DoR and DoI arguments. It was also related to the CtC argument, which highlighted tensions that the informant recognised in her own and other stakeholders' social responsibilities. In contrast, arguments appealing to higher loyalties related to perceived financial constraints, convenience, variety seeking or the perceived inferiority of FT products, illustrating the tension between more self-oriented goals and social responsibility.

The findings are only illustrative because this research approach cannot, of course, demonstrate causation and therefore cannot prove that the arguments are used as neutralising devices. However, the study did provide an indication that consumers have a range of accessible neutralisation techniques to justify their actions when they do not buy FT goods. Further research is required to demonstrate that neutralisation is at work in this context, but first it is necessary to outline how neutralisation relates to the constructs in existing models used to build understanding of ethical decisions. The next section gives a brief overview of models of ethical decision-making and social psychological models that have been applied in this context and outlines how the neutralisation construct might act as a moderating variable within these frameworks. A more detailed discussion of how neutralisation can be integrated with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) is then pursued.

Ethical decision-making: A moderating role for neutralisation?

In a recent review of the ethical decision-making literature, O'Fallon and Butterfield (2005) highlighted the surprising lack of research into identifying variables that may moderate key relationships of the existing ethical decision-making models. The primary function of neutralisation is to restore balance when people act in an attitudinally-incongruent manner and, as such, it may be an important moderating variable that explains ethical breaches in the everyday choices that people make.

Ethical decision-making literature

Attempts to understand ethical decision-making have increased substantially since the 1980s. Much of the research in managerial/organisational contexts is based on one or another of the prominent positive ethical decision-making models such as Hunt and Vitell's (1986; 1992) general theory of marketing ethics, Trevino's (1986) person-situation interactionist model, Ferrell and Gresham's (1985) contingency framework for understanding ethical decision-making and Jones' (1991) issue-contingent model (for reviews see Ford and Richardson, 1994; Loe et al. 2000; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Rest's (1979) four-stage model of moral judgment is often highlighted as a major influence in this stream of research (e.g. Jones, 1991; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Its four fundamental components – (1) recognising a moral issue, (2) making a moral judgment, (3) resolving to place moral concerns ahead of other concerns, and (4) acting on those moral concerns – can be viewed as the underlying structure of all the prominent ethical decision-making theories because, despite emphasising different variables/constructs, they focus in some way on one or more steps of this model. Whilst the role of neutralisation in some stages of this process was addressed as early as 1987 (Vitell and Grove, 1987), unfortunately, subsequent empirical research has remained very limited (McDonald and Pak, 1996).

Elsewhere in the consumer behaviour stream of research, Hunt and Vitell's (1986; 1992) theory of marketing ethics and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1985, 1991) are identified as the more commonly applied theoretical frameworks (Chatzidakis et al., 2004). The small amount of research that has specifically investigated consumers' support for the FT movement has concentrated on developing and testing models based on the TPB (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw et al. 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2002a, b, 2003).

The commonality in the fundamental structure of the ethical decision-making models suggests that the conceptualisation of neutralisation in relation to any model that represents this four-stage process, or part

thereof, can be relatively readily transferred. In this article we develop the conceptualisation in relation to the TPB. The TPB is arguably the most robust of all the attitude-behavioural models in social psychology and it has been successfully applied in a great variety of domains (for reviews, see e.g. Notani, 1998; Ajzen, 2001; Armitage and Conner, 2001). Crucially, it has been the most frequently applied and tested in various aspects of ethical consumer behaviour, including ethical purchase (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2002a, b, 2003), instances of consumer misconduct (Fukukawa, 2002) as well as more specific applications e.g. on software piracy (Chang, 1998), waste recycling (Chan, 1998) and green consumerism (e.g. Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Kalafatis et al., 1999). Therefore, conceptualising the moderating role of neutralisation in relation to this theoretical framework promotes consistency and comparability in this nascent area of research. Further, it is in principle open to the inclusion of other constructs so long as they increase TPB's explanatory power (Ajzen, 1991, p. 199). Lastly, it is in line with all the ethical decision-making models mentioned previously, as long as they allow for a step-by-step (from attitudes to intentions to behaviour) view of the cognitive process. For all the above reasons, and as a starting point for opening up a new direction for research on ethical decision-making and support for FT in particular, we conceptualise the moderating role of neutralisation, and present research propositions as a basis for future empirical testing, in relation to the TPB.

A moderating role for neutralisation?

Consumers often experience internal tensions when balancing their own desires with moral behaviour that favours societal well being and there is clear evidence that consumers' ethical concerns and attitudes are not always manifest in actual behaviour (e.g. Carrigan and Atalla, 2001). For example, consumers have been found to buy environmentally hazardous products regardless of their expression of concern for greener alternatives (Strong, 1996) and to shoplift regardless of their adherence to societal and economic norms of behaviour that guide marketplace behaviour (Strutton et al., 1994, 1997). Neutralisation describes a process of restoring equilibrium without attitude change.

Comment has been made more generally that theories of cognitive or attitude-behaviour consistency within social psychology have left the diverse modes of returning to a balanced state without attitude change unexplored (Hazani, 1991). Even within the cognitive dissonance literature, where attitudes after performing a counter-attitudinal behaviour have been found to remain in striking opposition to that behaviour, the focus has largely been on the arousal of dissonance, as opposed to the subsequent processes that lead to attitude change; hence generating little evidence regarding the nature of those processes (Kunda, 1990; Holland et al., 2002). Accordingly, Holland et al. (2002) observe that there is surprising little research on the different ways in which people justify their attitudinally-incongruent behaviour: The concept of neutralisation and the associated taxonomy of neutralisation techniques is a theoretical contribution that promises to build understanding of this gap. Despite the potential to elaborate on the contribution of neutralisation to cognitive consistency theories (see Eagly and Chaiken, 1993 for a review), in this article effort is directed at integrating it with the models adopted to understand ethical decisions, where it may be an important moderating variable, to build on the research momentum in this area.

There are examples of psychological processes similar to neutralisation being incorporated in established models of ethical decision-making. For example the "norm-activation" model incorporates "defensive denial", which has been found to have explanatory ability in contexts such as helping behaviour (Schwartz, 1977; Schwartz and Howard, 1981) and energy conservation (Tyler et al., 1982). Applying the TPB in the context of shoplifting, Fukukawa (2002) made a strong case for the inclusion of "perceived unfairness" in the model. From a neutralisation point-of-view, both of the above constructs represent a rather fragmented picture of the neutralising process: "defensive denial" relates to the technique of "denial of responsibility" whilst "perceived unfairness" to the "denial of victim". Hence, the incorporation of neutralisation into ethical decision-models promises a more holistic account of defensive psychological mechanisms.

Further indication that neutralisation might serve a significant role within the ethical decision-making process is provided by re-examining its underlying theoretical tenets in relation to a concept that has enjoyed more attention – at least within organisational ethical decision-making research – that is moral intensity (Jones, 1991). The moral intensity concept acknowledges the convergent support for the issue-contingent nature of moral decisions. The characteristics of the moral issue, collectively called "moral intensity", are important determinants of ethical decision-making and behaviour (for a review, see O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005). Jones (1991) proposed six basic components of moral intensity; magnitude of consequences, social consensus, probability of effect, temporal immediacy, proximity and concentration of effect. These are purported to independently affect all steps in the ethical decision-making process, as is neutralisation. Indeed, neutralisation-types of reasoning are very much based on a biased interpretation of precisely those situational characteristics. For example, the denial of injury technique may rely on downplaying an act's magnitude of consequences or underestimating the probability of (negative) effects, whilst the denial of victim may be based on its lack of temporal immediacy.

Conceptualising the role of neutralisation in consumers FT purchase behaviour

The TPB is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), suggesting that behaviour in a specified situation, is a direct function of behavioural intention, which in turn is a function of attitude and subjective norm. TPB differs from TRA by adding a new construct, perceived behavioural control, which refers to an individual's control beliefs and is suggested to impact both behavioural intentions and behaviour.

While the TPB has been found to have some explanatory ability, a large part of the ethical consumer decision-making still remains unexplained. In general, this has been accounted for by sampling, operationalisation and behaviour-specific issues (see e.g. Luzar and Cosse, 1998; Ogden, 2003) or by the addition of further constructs. For example, in the context of consumer ethics, Fukukawa (2002) has proposed the addition "perceived unfairness"; while in the ethical consumerism field, Shaw and colleagues (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2002a, b, 2003) have suggested the addition of "ethical obligation" and "self identity". Still, the model inevitably fails to account for the psychological realities of consumers who consistently behave in ways which are in apparent contradiction to their expressed ethical concerns. Figure 1 incorporates neutralisation in to TPB alongside the additional variables proposed by Shaw and colleagues to account for attitude-behaviour discrepancies in this context.

At the heart of neutralisation theory lays the acceptance of both a conventional norm and the situational exceptions to it. Therefore, contrary to the assumption underlying many studies based on the TPB, it does not assume that people's behaviour is always consistent with their attitudes. Indeed, the most important condition for neutralisation to play a role in consumers' ethical decision-making is that individuals should have a desire to commit an act (that represents a less ethical alternative) and at the same time have ethical bonds that require neutralisation (e.g. Minor, 1981; Dodder and Hughes, 1987). Within a TPB framework, these ethical bonds could translate in positive attitudes towards a behaviour, but also, in positive subjective norms. Whilst the latter could be subsumed under the former (see e.g. Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, p. 178), such a distinction would be in conceptual agreement

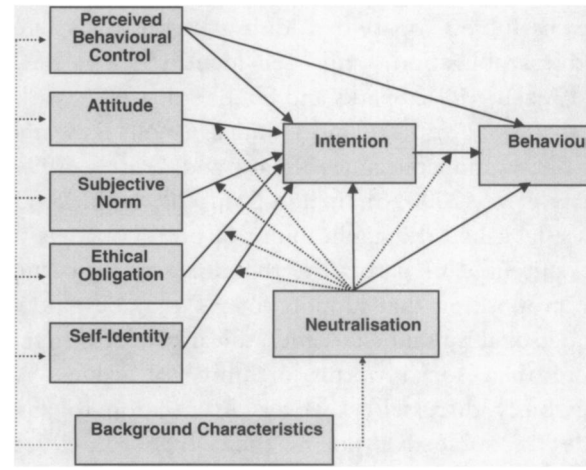

Figure 1. The direct and moderating effects of neutralisation in the theory of planned behaviour.

with the original application of neutralisation theory to norm-violating instances as well as with the discrete role of social norms, as highlighted in one way or another in most existing ethical decision-making models (e.g Hunt and Vitell, 1986, 1992; Ferrell and Gresham, 1985; Trevino, 1986;). We therefore present propositions on the direct and moderating role of neutralisation from both attitudes and subjective norms to intention, and then to actual behaviour, as follows:

P1a: Neutralisation has a direct, negative influence on consumers' behavioural intentions to purchase FT products.
P1b: The higher the acceptance of neutralising beliefs the weaker the relationship between attitudes and behavioural intention.
P1c: The higher the acceptance of neutralising beliefs the weaker the relationship between subjective norms and behavioural intention.
P2a: Neutralisation has a direct and indirect (via intentions) negative influence on actual FT purchase behaviour.
P2b: The higher the acceptance of neutralising beliefs the weaker the relationship between behavioural intentions and actual FT purchase behaviour.

The TPB is open to the inclusion of other constructs so long as they increase TPB's explanatory power (Ajzen, 1991, p. 199). Accordingly, when applied to behaviours that may be guided by ethical concerns, several studies have empirically confirmed the usefulness of two additional constructs, i.e. "ethical obligation" and "self-identity" (e.g. Beck and Ajzen, 1991; Sparks and Shepherd, 1992; Sparks et al. 1995; Armitage and Conner, 1999). Research by Shaw and colleagues (Shaw and Clarke, 1999; Shaw et al., 2000; Shaw and Shiu, 2002a, b, 2003) has established the applicability of both concepts to FT purchase in particular, therefore substantiating the proposition that support for FT may be guided by personal moral beliefs and ethical standards much more than social norms or universal values. As previously discussed however, in addition to attitudes or subjective norms these types of ethical bonds – as reflected in the constructs of ethical obligation and self-identity – may equally be weakened by the acceptance of neutralising beliefs. Hence the following propositions:

P3a: The higher the acceptance of neutralising beliefs the weaker the relationship between ethical obligation and behavioural intention.
P3b: The higher the acceptance of neutralising beliefs the weaker the relationship between self-identity and behavioural intention.

Within ethical decision-making research, several individual traits have been empirically established as important determinants of ethical behaviour such as gender, religion, locus of control and cognitive moral development (for reviews see Loe et al., 2000; O'Fallon and Butterfield, 2005; for consumer characteristics in particular, see Vitell, 2003). In line with a TPB framework however, personality traits, intelligence, demographic variables, values, and other variables of this kind are considered "background factors" that "...influence behaviour and intention indirectly by their effects on behavioural, normative or control beliefs and, through these beliefs, on attitudes, subjective norms or perceptions of control" (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005, p. 197) That is, they are not neglected but the components of the TPB are assumed to mediate the effects of background factors on intentions and actions. Since they are not expected to directly affect the relationships described in the above propositions, for the sake of parsimony and length considerations, we do not expand further on the influence of these factors. However, future research could benefit from identifying background characteristics that may influence the acceptance of neutralising beliefs in particular, as opposed to other proximal determinants of behaviour such as attitudes or subjective norms. For example, given that gender has already been found to influence the employment of neutralising beliefs (e.g. Ball, 1966; Ward and Beck, 1990; Bersoff, 2001), this would mean that the effects of neutralisation in the ethical decision-making process would be stronger for women rather than men. Identification of additional factors – particularly psychological ones – could provide valuable information about the origin of neutralising beliefs as well as possibly suggest ways for future interventions.

Conclusions and research directions

If most consumers hold several ethical concerns/pro-social attitudes, yet fail to behave accordingly (Bird and Hughes, 1997; Cowe and Williams, 2000), then it is imperative that existing theories of ethical consumer decision-making evolve to explain the ways in which people restore equilibrium without attitude change. To provide an initial impetus for this research, this article outlines neutralisation theory and discusses its applicability to consumption contexts that involve relatively minor ethical breaches and the particular case of buying FT products. It presents evidence from an exploratory study that identified the types of neutralising arguments that consumers use in relation to FT. There were a number of limitations to this study: a small convenience sample was used and it was restricted in terms of the demographic profile of the participants; they were all drawn from one geographic region of the U.K.; the analytical challenges common to this type of research. Further research is required to fully account for the nature of neutralising arguments in the FT context and as a basis for developing a scale to measure neutralisation in quantitative studies. The final part of the article examines how the neutralisation construct can be integrated with extant models used to build understanding of ethical decision-making and presents research propositions to facilitate empirical testing of the proposed relationships in future research.

The lack of literature on neutralisation at an intrapersonal level means that there is also a dearth of research that demonstrates the stage in the decision process at which neutralisation techniques are employed. For example, does neutralisation precede an act (rather than follow it)? It is often said that alternatively, neutralisation cannot be considered as an etiological theory of (im)moral behaviour. It would represent not much more than *ex post facto* explanations of deviant behaviour (Dunford and Kunz, 1973; Hollinger, 1991; Dabney, 1995, p. 316; for counterarguments see e.g. Peretti-Watel, 2003). To an extent, this is a methdological problem: experimental approaches have been underrepresented in the neutralisation literature; since for both ethical and practical reasons neither neutralisation (as the independent variable) not many dependent variables of interest (e.g. extreme criminal behaviour) can be easily manipulated (e.g. Bohner et al., 1998). The few exceptions include a study on failure to declare overpayment (Bersoff, 2001), one on environmentally harmful behaviour (i.e. drinking from one-way tins; Fritsche, 2003) and two methodologically similar studies (embedding an experimental manipulation in a questionnaire) on intentions to commit minor delinquent acts (e.g. shoplifting and free-riding; Schwarz and Bayer, 1989) and on rape proclivity (Bohner et al.1998). However, support of FT, which is a relatively minor ethical breach, can be examined experimentally and this is a primary direction for further research.

Apart from advancing understanding on the consumer's ethical decision-making, such a research endeavour could have important implications for actual marketing communications and public policy initiatives. For example, neutralisation could be a promising alternative to existing communication strategies, based for example on informational or emotional appeals. In fact, while the phenomenon of attitude-behaviour discrepancies is increasingly viewed as a pertinent issue within ethical consumer research (e.g. Roberts, 1996; Carrigan and Atalla, 2001; Worcester and Dawkins, 2005), there is much more to be done if to establish the most effective psychological approaches (e.g. inducement of guilt; Bennett, 1996) for actively reducing those discrepancies. A neutralisation-based approach could take advantage of understanding how consumers use neutralisation techniques to justify pursuing their more selfish goals (initially through qualitative data such as those reported here in the context of FT) and then address the use of these mechanisms head-on. It is hoped that future experimental studies will provide a more appropriate theoretical and empirical basis for substantiating the above proposition as well as examine those effects in more directly relevant, communication/intervention-based environments.

Note

[1] For the purposes of this paper FT products are defined as goods "purchased under equitable trading agreements, involving cooperative rather than competitive trading principles, ensuring a fair price and fair working conditions for the producers and suppliers" (Strong, 1996, p. 5).

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