

An exploration of the mediating factors between consumers ethical consumption attitudes and actual ethical purchase behaviours in the Irish consumption context.

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Abstract

The ethical consumer is one that has been receiving an increasing amount of attention in recent years. Research has pointed to the growing influence exerted by these consumers. Yet it has also been noted that there is a dichotomy between consumers oft stated pro-ethical attitudes and their less frequent pro-ethical purchase behaviour. Previous studies have been employed to try and understand this gap which is commonly referred to in the literature as the attitude- behaviour gap or the ethical-purchasing gap. There is a distinct lack of studies of into the 'gap' in the Irish context however. Past studies have also tended to focus exclusively on the environmental context of ethical consumption.

This study seeks to explore the mediating factors between consumers ethical consumption attitudes and actual ethical purchase behaviours in the Irish consumption context. A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews is employed to offer insight and seek understanding of the complex factors that intervene between possessing a pro-ethical attitude and enacting this in the form of actual purchase behaviour.

Eight interviews were conducted and thematic analysis was used to identify salient themes. It was found that participants all displayed pro-ethical attitudes although variance in the strength of this was noted. It was also found that the focus of ethical concern tended to vary between participants. A noticeable theme was that to be ethical in one's purchase behaviour is difficult and requires commitment. The findings suggest that price, lack of information and lack of availability are the most common mediating factors that affect the translation of an ethical consumption attitude into actual ethical purchase behaviour. Other factors to emerge were consumer scepticism, time pressure and the influence of existing forces of habit. The conclusions section also makes some recommendations for future research.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents Jerry and Ann and my sister and brothers.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr Corina Sheerin for her support and invaluable advice offered throughout this project.

I would also like to thank Jason C. Healy for recommending some important key articles early in the research process which provided the impetus for subsequent research.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1 Current State of Research into Ethical Consumption and the mediating factors between Ethical Consumption Attitude and actual Ethical Behaviour

The ethical consumer is one that has been receiving an increasing amount of attention in recent years. Research has pointed to the growing influence exerted by these consumers who it is said choose companies products and services according to their personal morals and beliefs. Yet the research has increasingly begun to note the fact that there is a dichotomy between consumers oft stated pro-ethical attitudes and their less frequent pro-ethical purchase behaviour. Various studies- both qualitative and quantitative in nature have been employed to try and understand this gap which is commonly referred to in the literature as the attitude- behaviour gap or the ethical-purchasing gap.

Much of the current research is founded upon the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) which states that consumers behaviour is a function of their behavioural intention which in turn depends upon three components- namely the consumers attitude towards their behaviour, the influence of the consumers subjective norms and finally the consumers perceived behavioural control. Prior research has found a variety of factors- some more prevalent than others which mediate between the consumers stated pro-ethical attitude and their actual behaviour. While these factors are generally ascribed to one or other of the three components of the theory of planned behaviour, more recently critics have questioned the theory's over-reliance on rational reasoning and suggested that there may be other contextual factors outside the ethical consumers mind which influences ethical consumer behaviour (Carrington, et al., 2010).

1.2 Gaps in the Literature

The literature on ethical consumption is an evolving one. In recent years attempts have been undertaken to gain a better understanding of the attitude- behaviour gap but even so it has not yet been fully understood. Furthermore, there is a paucity of research into the

complex area of ethical purchasing in the specific Irish context. While internationally, mediating factors such as price sensitivity, perceptions of quality and lack of information or knowledge about ethical claims have been identified, to the authors knowledge research of this kind has not been undertaken to date in Ireland to establish if similar explanatory factors emerge from the data.

1.3 Overall aim of the study

This research project aims to explore the factors that mediate between consumers ethical consumption attitudes and actual purchase behaviour in the Irish consumption context. In order to achieve this an understanding of consumers attitudes towards ethical consumption will be explored. How these attitudes translate into behaviour and the mediating factors that may intervene will also be examined to gain insight into what these are (if any) and what relevance they may have. The research aims to provide academics and marketers with a greater understanding and knowledge of the gap between ethical consumption attitude and actual ethical purchase behaviour.

1.4 Overview of Research Project Structure

This thesis is divided into six sections.

Chapter 1 summarise the current state of the research into ethical consumption and the factors that mediate between ethical consumption attitude and actual ethical consumption behaviour. Gaps in the literature are identified and the overall aim of the study is set out. This section concludes with an overview of the research project structure.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the most relevant literature on the attitude-behaviour gap in ethical purchasing. This chapter sets the proper academic context for the research that follows. The literature review synthesises the key research and examines the most influential theoretical frameworks that have been proposed to explain the attitude-behaviour gap in the ethical purchasing context.

In chapter 3 the research aims and objectives are presented. The methodology of the research moving from the chosen research philosophy to the approach, strategy and research design are each then presented and justified in turn. Ethical considerations and the methodology limitations are also presented in this chapter.

Chapter 4 sets out the main findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of the data uncovered in the primary research.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed discussion of the findings in relation to the research objectives. The findings are also discussed in relation to the secondary research as revealed in the literature review. Limitations of the study are also discussed.

Finally, in chapter 6 conclusions are made as to whether the primary research undertaken has met the stated research aims and objectives. Recommendations for future research are also set out.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 What is Ethical Consumption?

The term 'ethical' consumption is a broad one that is sometimes used interchangeably in the literature with 'socially conscious' or 'socially responsible' consumption.

Ethical consumption has been defined as;

“the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs” (Crane & Matten, 2010).

Socially Conscious consumption has been defined as;

“A consumer who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption, or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change” (Webster, 1975).

Socially Responsible Consumption has been defined as;

“a person basing his or her acquisition, usage and disposition of products on a desire to minimise or eliminate any harmful effects and maximise the long-run beneficial impact on society” (Mohr, et al., 2001).

While some contend that the term 'ethical consumerism' is too broad and therefore difficult to operationalise (Devinney, et al., 2010) it is used extensively in the literature and as such this is the term which is employed throughout this research study.

2.2 Background

The rise in ethical consumerism, which began in the latter part of the 20th century and continues to this day has been noted by several authors e.g., (Strong, 1996; Carrington, et al., 2010). Efforts to explain this growth have suggested such contributory features as the evolving caring customers of the 1990s, pressure group support for fairer trading practices with the third world, an increase in media interest in fair trade issues and increasing corporate responsibility (Strong, 1996).

It has also been noted in the literature that the concept of ethical consumption has evolved over time from one that was primarily focussed on environmental issues to one that is broadly concerned with matters of conscience and includes such concerns as animal welfare, labour rights, human rights and health related issues (Carrigan, et al., 2004) and the arms trade and fair trade (Shaw & Shiu, 2002). In tandem with the growth in interest in ethical consumption as a field of enquiry there has been a corresponding growth in research into the closely related field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the affect such activities have on consumers attitudes and subsequent purchase intention etc towards the company and its products and services.

In the literature, it has been asserted that ethical consumerism represents an evolution of green consumerism (Chatzidakis, et al., 2006). Green consumption has also been categorised as a subset of ethical consumption (Carrington, et al., 2010). It is also argued that because ethical consumption encompasses a broader range of issues than green consumerism the resultant consumer decision-making process is more complex (Shaw & Shiu, 2002). Despite this it has been noted in a review of the empirical research conducted into the intention- behaviour gap that research into the environmental context of ethical consumption predominates with the result that “published results are limited to one narrow ethical perspective” (Hassan, et al., 2016: 224).

The broad range of issues that ethical consumption encompasses can also lead to internal tensions for would-be ethical consumers, as for instance the decision to adopt a good environmental behaviour may directly lead to a detrimental societal effect through the performance of that same behaviour (Moraes, et al., 2012).

The literature points out that consumers not only voice their ethical concerns through the buying of goods and services for their positive qualities but can also boycott goods and services for their negative qualities (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005). Indeed, it has been argued that consumers are more likely to punish bad behaviour than reward good behaviour (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000).

2.3 Are Consumers Ethical?

The literature commonly refers to ethical consumption as taking an increasingly important role in society and markets for several years. Yet the research into ethical consumption reveals contradictions in the findings as consumers express concern for environmental and ethical issues in surveys but their purchasing behaviour does not bear this out. For example, a study which found that 30% of respondents who stated that they would purchase ethically also found that only 3% were currently doing so (Futerra, cited in (Carrington, et al., 2010)). Similarly, in citing research which recorded that 25% of UK consumers would be willing to pay extra for ethical and organic cleaning products it was noted that sales in the sector were still dominated by conventional brands that were not promoted as environmentally friendly (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). From the perspective of the company it has even been argued that there appears to be very little commercial benefit accruing in terms of increased consumer purchasing as an outcome from behaving as an ethical marketer (Carrigan & Attala, 2001).

It has been observed in the literature that evidence of a growing market for ethical products has often been inferred from the results of opinion polls (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005). One recent study revealed that 94% of respondents said they would switch to a brand that is associated with a good cause (Altin & Hooper, 2013). Yet as outlined in the following sections doubt has been expressed as to the reliability of these results.

2.4 The Attitude- Behaviour Gap

There has been much focus in the literature into ethical consumption on what has been termed the attitude- behaviour gap (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000) or the ethical purchasing gap e.g., (Bray, et al., 2011). This describes the gap between the expression of pro-ethical consumption attitudes on the one hand and subsequent behaviour on the other. Put succinctly, researchers have found that expressing a willingness to purchase based on ethical considerations does not correspond with actual behaviour (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Belk, et al., 2005). One study for example revealed that when ethical consumers were asked if they had purchased a product in the previous year because it was associated with a good

cause, the number who indicated in the affirmative was much lower when compared with those that expressed a willingness to purchase (Carrigan & Attala, 2001).

The literature contains two separate reasons for the existence of the attitude-behaviour gap in the ethical purchasing context. The first of these is social desirability bias and is discussed in section 2.4.1 below. Secondly there exists a complex set of factors which intercede between consumers stated pro ethical attitudes and their actual purchase behaviour which are introduced in section 2.4.2 from a theoretical modelling perspective and then examined and elucidated in greater detail in section 2.4.3 from a largely qualitative research point of view.

2.4.1 Social desirability bias

A sizable amount of literature suggests that intentions to purchase ethically are overstated in research due to a tendency by respondents to provide answers they believe to be socially desirable (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Crane, 1999; Morrell & Jayawardhena, 2010).

Socially desirable responses have been defined as;

answers that make the respondent look good, based on cultural norms about the desirability of certain values, traits, attitudes, interests, opinions and behaviour (Steenkamp, et al., 2010: 200).

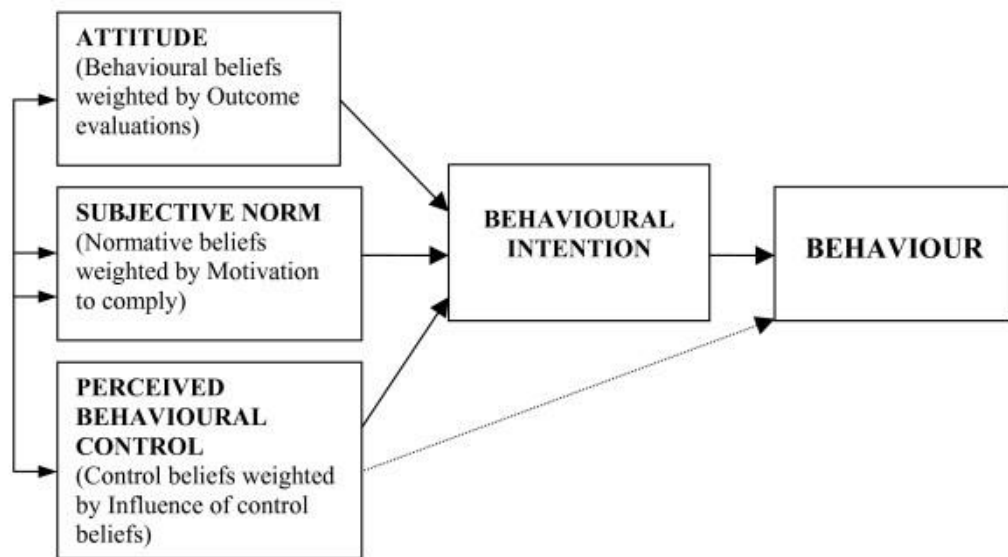
Social desirability bias has been conceptualised as relating to two separate contexts of human experience, namely an agency bias and a communion bias. The agency related context has been labelled as egoistic response tendencies (ERT) and involves dominance, mastery, assertiveness, power, autonomy, control, influence, status, and independence. The communion related context has been labelled as moralistic response tendencies (MRT) and involves affiliation, association, approval, belonging, love, intimacy and nurturance (Paulhus & John 1998, cited in Steenkamp, et al., 2010). This conceptualisation has been expanded upon by (Paulhus 2002, cited in Steenkamp, et al., 2010) who cross-classifies ERT and MRT with the respondents degree of awareness. Thus socially desirable responses can be unconscious or can be deliberately manipulated.

In relation to research into the occurrence of social desirable answering where sensitive topics are concerned, it has been found to occur as a deliberate process in which respondents edit their answers to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of the interviewer (Tourangeau, 2007). It has been suggested that surveys lead to a decontextualization effect where respondents are abstracted from the situation (Shaw, et al., 2016). This it is argued has led to a distortion on the importance of ethical issues and their influence on purchase intention. The use of highly quantitative positivist approaches to undergoing ethics research (as opposed to a more flexible interpretive approach) has also been criticised for delivering unconvincing and biased results in the field (Crane, 1999).

2.4.2 Overview of theoretical frameworks for understanding the Attitude- Behaviour Gap

A large amount of the literature on ethical consumption is grounded in the highly influential Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) e.g., (Chatzidakis, et al., 2007; De Pelsmacker & Janssens, 2007). The TPB states that consumers behaviours are a function of their behavioural intentions with three separate components feeding into and explaining behavioural intentions. These are consumers attitude towards the behaviour (i.e., whether the behaviour is evaluated favourably or unfavourably), subjective norms towards the behaviour (i.e., whether there exists social pressure (or not) and to what degree, to perform the behaviour) and thirdly their perceived behavioural control (i.e., the extent to which the individual believes in their ability to enact the behaviour) (Ajzen, 1991).

Table 1: Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)



Source:(Ajzen, 1991)

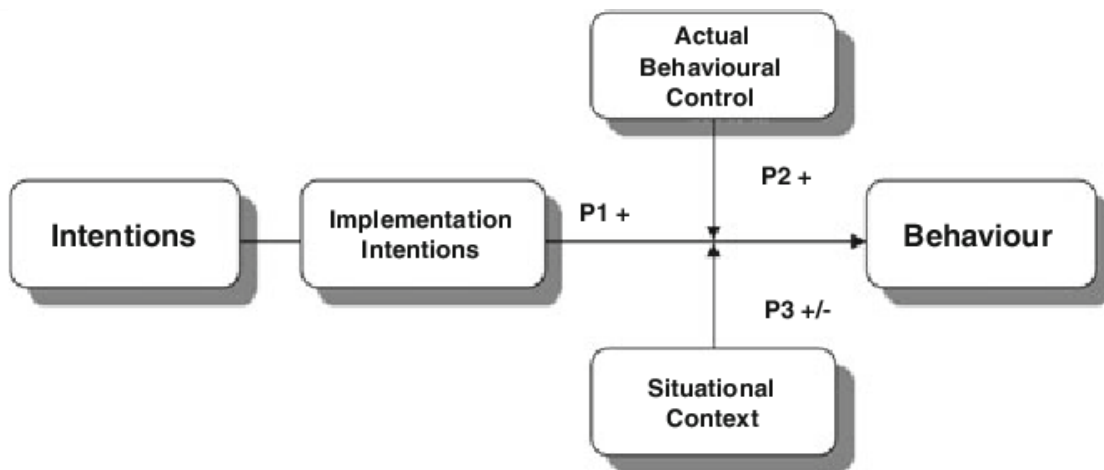
It has been argued that the extant literature on ethical consumption largely adopts a consumer decision-making perspective and while this provides useful insights, it also assumes that deliberate cognitive processing underlies the consumers ethical purchasing (or non-purchasing) behaviour which may not necessarily be the case in reality (Janssen & Vanhamme, 2013). It has been argued that decision making is complex and does not occur in isolation from the world outside the consumers own cognitive processes (Carrington, et al., 2010). Similarly, (Moraes, et al., 2012) in taking issue with the focus on individual consumers as rational decision makers who are disconnected from wider socio-cultural forces, propose that consumption be viewed as something that is intertwined with social relations and norms. These existing models of consumer decision-making have also been criticised for being only partially satisfactory as they do not take account of the more societally-focused viewpoints of ethical consumers (Shaw & Shiu, 2002).

It has also been observed that “investigations that rely on intention as a proxy for actual behaviour must be interpreted with caution” (Ajzen, et al., 2004: p1119).

Whereas the TPB postulates three conceptually independent determinants of behavioural intentions (Carrington, et al., 2010) suggest that there are a variety of internal and

environmental factors which mediate between the purchase intention and the purchase behaviour. They propose a conceptual framework that integrate the mediating role of three separate factors. These are *implementation intentions* (a mental cognitive plan that when put into action positively mediates or helps bridge the gap between intention and behaviour), *actual behavioural control* (the individual’s ability to exert control in the enactment of an intention in a particular situation) and finally *situational context* (the environment outside of the consumers mind and including such factors as price promotions, product placement, visibility, store crowding and interaction with sales people etc). While this framework should be regarded as a thought-provoking addition to the literature on the subject the majority of studies on the attitude- behaviour gap to date have focussed on the predictors of behavioural intention and less so on the factors that mediate between actual behavioural intention and behaviour.

Table 2: Conceptual Model of Intention- behaviour mediation



Source: (Carrington, et al., 2010)

2.4.3 Factors impeding the translation of ethical attitudes and intentions into actual behaviour

In recent years there has been a significant growth in research into the discrepancy between consumers ethical attitudes and their actual behaviour from the viewpoint of gaining an understanding of the underlying reasons for this. It has been proposed that there are a hierarchy of reasons for this- for example it has been suggested that consumers distinguish between core, central and peripheral factors (Oberseder, et al., 2011). The remainder of this chapter looks at the key factors which have been identified in the literature to date as having a mediating role in the translation of pro-ethical attitudes into actual behaviour.

2.4.3.1 Price

In an exploratory study into the factors which impede ethical consumption it was found that price sensitivity was the most commonly cited factor that impeded ethical consumption (Bray, et al., 2011). This was exemplified in Bray, et als study where the response of one focus group respondent indicated that:

“I don’t.... consider ethical products in a supermarket because it is a bill you pay weekly and you need it to be as small as possible” (p.601).

Eckhardt, et al (2010) examined the rationalisations and justifications for consumers variance in their attitudes to ethical consumerism and subsequent behaviour. They found that economic rationalisations (value for money to the consumer) were to the fore. Price has also been found to be a key impediment to purchasing ethical-luxury goods (Davies, et al., 2012) and green products (Gleim, et al., 2013; Barbarossa & Pastore, 2015).

Another study found that there was an unwillingness on the part of consumers to choose even the most well-behaved companies if their products cost more than competitors alternatives (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000). In another study based on the purchase of Fair-Trade coffee it was found that the average price premium consumers were willing to pay for a Fair- Trade label was 10% (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005).

2.4.3.2 Lack of Information/ Communication

A lack of availability of information was also identified as a theme when examining the factors that impede ethical consumption (Bray, et al., 2011) and a reason given in the non-ethical consumption of luxury goods (Davies, et al., 2012). A Finnish quantitative study also found that the most important obstacle to increasing ethical consumption was the difficulty consumers had in finding out information about ethical products (Uusitalo & Oksanen, 2004). One qualitative study on the importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in consumers consumption decisions found that consumers consider information on a company's CSR position as a prerequisite in considering CSR in the purchasing process (Oberseder, et al., 2011). Furthermore, they found two information dimensions; the level of information (which describes the extent of their knowledge about the company's CSR initiatives) and the type of information (which describes their perception of it as being positive or negative). An exploratory study examined the role that neutralisation techniques play as an explanation for why people do not buy Fair Trade (FT) products even when identifying FT as an ethical concern (Chatzidakis, et al., 2007). These neutralisation techniques which are adapted from research into criminology and juvenile delinquency act as rationalisations or justifications for people's non-ethical purchase behaviour. One of the five neutralisation techniques is termed 'Denial of Responsibility' (e.g., "the Supermarkets don't inform me about these things") which was found to be employed by consumers in ethically challenging situations such as in the quote below:

"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..." (p.92).

In the literature, a link has been identified between a lack of communication and the price barrier discussed in 2.4.3.1 above. As an outcome of the lack of communication about the positive consequences of ethical products consumers fail to assign them an adequate value which only serves to reinforces their unwillingness to pay extra for them (McDevitt, et al., 2007).

2.4.3.3 Perception of Quality

A perception that ethical products are of a lower quality has been noted in the research (Bray, et al., 2011). The research also suggests that consumers are not prepared to sacrifice product quality for the sake of ethical company behaviour (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Indeed, there is a suggestion in the research that there may be a credibility issue with certain ethical offerings as it has been found that consumers are less willing to buy a product produced by a non-profit organisation than one produced by a for-profit owing to a perception that the non-profit is less competent (Aaker, et al., 2010). Sustainable products have also been found to be viewed negatively across certain 'strength attributes' or perceived product benefits to consumers such as 'power' and 'durability' (Luchs, et al., 2010).

2.4.3.4 Consumer Scepticism and Cynicism

One study into the Ethical Purchasing Gap in the context of perceptions towards green consumption identified as one of three dominant themes the notion of 'green reservations' which could be described as consumers ambivalence that by making green product choices they will actually make a difference to the environment (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). As they have observed:

Some consumers did not perceive a significant difference between the products that were promoted as environmentally friendly and those products that were not, as there was no visible evidence that non-EF products were more harmful compared with environmentally friendly products (p.332).

The exploratory study employed by (Chatzidakis, et al., 2007) found that Denial of injury (aka Denial of Benefit) (e.g., "Fair Trade only marginally contributes to the welfare of a minority of Third World producers") was one of the neutralisation techniques that was employed in ethically challenging situations. (Bray, et als., 2011) findings also lend weight to the 'green reservations' insight above as they found that people were more likely to purchase ethically when a news story focussed on the particular ethical issue. Another investigation observed consumers cynicism towards retailers CSR efforts such as what they

saw as the incompatibility of reducing supplier prices with a commitment to social justice such as worker's rights and the need for less intensive agriculture (Mejri, et al., 2012). Another factor which is likely to increase consumers level of cynicism and scepticism is when a company's ethical claim does not appear to be aligned with the company's core business (Oberseder, et al., 2011).

2.4.3.5 Availability and Convenience

Lack of availability of green products in traditional supermarkets and retail stores has been identified in one qualitative study as one of the main barriers to purchase by environmentally conscious consumers (Barbarossa & Pastore, 2015) as evidenced by this comment:

"I cannot waste two hours of my life every week to purchase toilet paper or napkins. I simply buy tissue products at the closest store or at the supermarket where I usually go shopping"
(p.195)

This has also emerged as a barrier in the case of ethical alternatives in the luxury goods sector (Davies, et al., 2012). The belief that it 'is hard to be green' was an observed theme in one exploratory study which noted that it was something made more difficult based on where one lived (Johnstone & Tan, 2015) while participants in another study argued that a limited range of ethical alternatives prevented them from buying according to their principles (Papaoikonomou, et al., 2011).

What the foregoing implies is that consumers sometimes believe that they do not have the resources or the opportunity to perform the ethical consumption behaviour in practice, much like the perception in 2.4.3.2 above of not feeling in complete control due to the level and type of information which they receive.

2.4.3.6 Peer Group influence

The normative influence of family and friends have been identified as a factor that can lead to consumers either switching to, or away from a company that behaves in a socially

responsible fashion (Oberseder, et al., 2011). In another qualitative study which examined ethical consumers in the family consumer decision-making context, a theme was identified which depicts ethical consumption as an on-going 'trade-off' between an individual's own ethical consumption desires and the need for familial acceptance with the result that non-ethical choices are often prioritised (Carey, et al., 2008)

In a study that examined green- buying behaviour from a social dilemma or reference group perspective, expectations of others co-operation, was identified as the strongest factor that discriminated between green-buyers and non-green buyers (Gupta & Ogden, 2009), i.e., the green buyer makes co-operative decisions as they expect others to do the same. They also found that factors such as the strength of an individual's in-group identity or how strongly they identify with the group are more likely to lead them to make decisions that benefit the group rather than themselves.

The impact that the broader society has on individual behaviour of consumers is worthy of some consideration here too. It has been found that some ardent sustainable consumption adherents can experience the practice as socially alienating, which it is argued because of the important role shopping and consumption play in social interactions "makes it difficult to condemn consumption without alienating the person" (Cherrier, 2012: p263). To put this in another way consumers pro-ethical attitudes are susceptible to modification based on a desire to fit in with the normative influences of the society around them.

2.4.3.7 Institutional dependency

In a qualitative explorative study which discussed the rationalisations behind interviewees lack of ethical consumption patterns, the notion that institutions such as government have regulatory responsibility to prevent unethical products being sold emerged as a justification strategy (Eckhardt, et al., 2010). The responses they elicited also revealed specific incidences of consumers equating the ethics of consumerism with actual legality as revealed by the following statement- "if its legal people should buy it, but if it is illegal they shouldn't" (p.431). These rationalisations were labelled as institutional dependency and have also

been found as a contributory factor to non-adoption in the green consumption context (Johnstone & Tan, 2015).

2.4.3.8 Green Stigma

Green stigma which is an unfavourable attitude towards green messages and consumers emerged as one of three dominant themes in one such qualitative study into the gap between green behavioural intentions and actual behaviour (Johnstone & Tan, 2015). What was inferred from the responses of the focus group respondents was the connotation that green consumers see themselves as better than others and are viewed as serious individuals, while green consumption messages are sometimes perceived as though the recipient is being 'preached to'. This is exemplified by the following response of one focus group interviewee:

"when someone says environmentally-friendly I automatically feel like someone is going to try and shove something down my throat and I do not like that feeling...I'm a little bit resistant towards it" (p.320).

2.4.3.9 Other factors

One study noted the role that purchasing inertia played as a barrier to ethical consumption (Bray, et al., 2011). Interestingly, although the issue of Price was a dominant factor in their study, when participants were asked to disregard this they fell back on brand attachment defences e.g., 'I am a Heinz person'. Participants in another study noted that it takes self-discipline and requires personal sacrifice if one wants to be green (Johnstone & Tan, 2015).

In one previous study developmental realism- which relates to the expressed view that for economies to develop a certain amount of unethical behaviour will pertain, has been given as a justification strategy (Eckhardt, et al., 2010). In another qualitative study in response to the moderator of a focus group specifically prompting Nikes employment practices in the third world one respondent stated:

“It is exploitation but without companies such as Nike, they wouldn’t have a job at all”

(Carrigan & Attala, 2001)

While the above listed factors represent the literatures current explanation for the existence of the ethical purchasing gap a limitation of this is- as mentioned earlier when examining the Theory of Planned Behaviour, is that the above listed factors all assume a deliberate cognitive process. Researchers have found that people make up reasons for their behaviour when they are not able to explain the real causes that underlie that particular behaviour and therefore asking them will only lead to incorrect estimates to account for the said behaviour (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977 cited in Janssen & Vanhamme, 2013).

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 – Introduction

This chapter will provide a discussion on the various methodological considerations behind this study. The overall aims and objectives of the research are set out in section 3.2. The remainder of this chapter presents a detailed research methodology that is orientated to be in service to the achievement of the research aims and objectives. In section 3.3 an overview of the research philosophies are presented and an argument will be proposed in justification of the philosophical reasoning which underpins the chosen research approach and design. Section 3.4 considers the research approach and then in section 3.5 the research design discusses the research method and research strategy employed. Section 3.6 presents and discusses the chosen sample. Ethical considerations are of the utmost importance in conducting research and these will also be addressed in section 3.7. The limitations of this study are set out in section 3.8 and finally the method of data analysis will be discussed in section 3.9.

3.2 - Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of this research project is to explore the mediating factors between ethical consumption attitudes and actual ethical purchase behaviours in the Irish consumption context. To help achieve these aims further research objectives are set to help fulfil this.

3.2.1 - Research Objective 1

The first research objective is to understand consumers attitudes towards the issue of ethical consumption in the Irish consumption context. It is hoped that this objective will offer insights into consumers beliefs and level of concern surrounding ethical issues, products and consumption. As the overall aim of the research project however is to explore the factors that mediate between ethical consumption attitude and actual ethical purchase

behaviour there is a requirement that research objective 1 above does uncover a cohort of respondents that express some level of pro-ethical attitude in the first instance. To ensure this, precautionary steps have been taken with the sample which are discussed in more detail in section 3.6 below.

3.2.2 – Research Objective 2

The second research objective is to understand and gain an insight into the individual factors that mediate between consumers who express pro-ethical attitudes and their actual ethical consumption behaviour. As discussed under 3.2.1 above it is expected that this objective will be made operationalisable as a result of some precautionary steps being taken with the sample which is discussed in more detail in section 3.6 below.

3.2.3 – Research Objective 3

The third objective of the study is to assess which barriers are perceived as the most relevant in hampering the purchase of ethical products for those consumers who identify as having pro-ethical consumption attitudes. This objective will attempt to build on research objective 2 by ordering the main barriers according to their overall relevance as intervening variables between consumers pro-ethical attitude and actual ethical consumption behaviour.

3.3 Research Philosophy

(Saunders, et al., 2012) compare research methodology development to the layers of an onion. Before arriving at the innermost layer comprising research collection and data analysis, researchers must first begin at the outermost layer which is the research philosophy that underpins and guides the research approach and method. The research philosophy can be said to relate to one's assumptions about how the world is perceived and how one can come to understand it (Trochim, 2001). Positivism and Interpretivism are

respectively the two philosophical positions with both representing distinct epistemological viewpoints. Epistemology has been defined as “a branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and what constitutes acceptable knowledge within a field of study” (Saunders, et al., 2012).

The Positivist philosophy is one that favours the approach of the natural sciences. Some of the key principles of the positivist approach are that only phenomena that can be confirmed by the senses can be regarded as knowledge, that the purpose of theory is to generate and test hypotheses that will allow explanations of laws to be assessed, and that scientific study must be carried out in a way that is objective and value free (Bryman, 2008). Criticisms of positivism argue that its reductive focus on laws and generalisations preclude the kind of rich insight into what is a complex social world (Saunders, et al., 2012). In the field of business ethics research some authors have been critical of the overly positivist and thus highly quantitative approaches which they have criticised for the poor and unconvincing quality of empirical research undertaken in the field (Crane, 1999)

The Interpretivist philosophy on the other hand rejects the application of the natural science model to the study of the social world and instead promote the view that the subject matter of the social world such as people and institutions is fundamentally different to the natural world (Bryman, 2008). For the interpretive researcher then the nature of reality is socially constructed and subjective and therefore from an epistemological point of view the researcher views subjective meanings and social phenomena as constituting acceptable knowledge and that research is value bound since the researcher is part of what is being researched (Saunders, et al., 2012).

It has been noted that marketing as a conception is evolving and that over the course of time there has been a shift in thinking from an ideology that was almost solely guided by empiricism and the quantifiable towards recognising the importance of such factors as situational context, the subjectivity of perception and the construed nature of human reality (Hirschman, 1986). The gap between consumers attitudes towards ethical consumption and their actual ethical consumption behaviour has been noted in the Literature Review in Chapter 2 as being complex with a range of situational and normative factors playing an intervening role. This lends credence to the use of interpretivism as a guiding philosophy for the conducting of an investigation into the ethical consumption attitude-behaviour gap.

Furthermore, this approach has been taken in many of the previous studies into ethical consumption behaviour which were analysed in chapter 2 e.g. (Bray, et al., 2011; Carey, et al., 2008; Eckhardt, et al., 2010; Oberseder, et al., 2011).

An argument has also been proposed in favour of taking a pragmatic approach which rather than viewing positivism and interpretivism as two competing and oppositional philosophical positions, contends that it is useful to consider each across a multi-dimensional set of continua in light of the particular study being undertaken. This stance is one that is acknowledged here and furthermore it is argued that the pragmatic research philosophy deems an interpretive qualitative approach as most appropriate to employ in this particular instance in view of the research question under study.

3.4 Research Approach

Deductive and inductive theory represent two different approaches to conducting social research. The deductive approach is based around the researcher testing theory and using the resultant observations and findings to confirm or reject the theory. The inductive approach on the other hand is based around the researcher making observations or revealing findings and “drawing generalisable inferences” from those observations as described by (Bryman, 2008).

It has been argued that where research into ethics is concerned, an inductive approach is superior to other approaches which define ethical terms at the outset and “force” respondents to answer them which can affect the validity of the results as other concerns are not considered (Crane, 1999).

3.5 Research Design

Having conducted a thorough review of the literature in Chapter 2 and having set out the Research aims and objectives in 3.2 above it is necessary to select the appropriate methodology in service of those aims and objectives. In so doing the methodological choice has been guided by the philosophical orientation of the researcher and the chosen research

approach which has immediately preceded this stage. It has been noted for example that adopting an interpretivist paradigm will naturally lead to a qualitative research strategy (Hiller, 2010). In the following sections, the research method (3.5.1) and research strategy (3.5.2) are examined in closer detail.

3.5.1 Research Method

It has been asserted by (Silverman, 2000) that “the choice between different research methods should depend on what you are trying to find out”. It has been noted that adopting an interpretivist approach will naturally lead to a qualitative research design (Bryman, 2008). Qualitative research is preferred when the purpose of the study is to increase the depth of the understanding of consumers decisions (Patton, 2002). Researchers have contended that where ethical research is concerned, non-survey based research is useful in uncovering nuanced consumer reactions (Eckhardt, et al., 2010). In addition, it has been proposed that in fields of enquiry where there is a divergence between the stated attitude and actual behaviour that a qualitative approach is more helpful (Belk, et al., 2005).

The foregoing suggests that a qualitative approach is adjudged most suitable for an exploration of the factors which mediate between Irish consumers attitudes to ethical consumption and their actual ethical consumption behaviour.

3.5.2 Research Strategy

Semi- structured, research interviews were chosen as the most appropriate research strategy. It has been asserted that while both self-administered questions and interviews are prone to social desirability bias the likelihood of this occurring is lessened where the research is conducted in an interview context (Sandhu, 2012). In the literature review into ethical consumption, there are numerous previous instances of semi-structured interviews being deployed as a means of qualitative investigation (e.g. Carey, et al., 2008; Chatzidakis, et al., 2007; Oberseder, et al., 2011).

Focus group interviews which have also been widely used as a means of qualitative investigation into ethical consumption (e.g. Bray, et al., 2011; Carrigan & Attala, 2001; Johnstone & Tan, 2015) were also considered as an alternative means of enquiry. It has been claimed however that focus group interviews can lead to self-presentational concerns amongst interviewees to “do and say the right thing” (Bristol & Fern, 2003), which combined with other practical considerations such as the difficulty in organising a suitable time that would suit all interviewees, led to the decision that semi-structured interviews would be the most appropriate research strategy to use.

3.6 Sample

The sampling method employed was a mixture of purposive and convenience based. Originally it was intended to use a convenience only sample but subsequently it was decided that this posed a risk that the research objective would remain unmet. As the overall objective of this study is to explore the mediating factors between Irish Consumers attitudes and their ethical behaviours there is a requirement that at least some of the respondents express pro-ethical attitudes in the first instance. It has been argued in the literature that purposive sampling aids in the selection of information-rich cases (Patton 2002, cited in Saunders, et al., 2012). This method has also been used in previous research into ethical consumer behaviour (e.g Chatzidakis, et al., 2007; Papaoikonomou, et al., 2011).

To this end potential participants who are members of Plastic Awareness Ireland and Zero Waste Ireland were invited to participate. Plastic Awareness Ireland is a Facebook and Meetup.com group of like minded passionate people who are concerned about how plastic is polluting the environment and who meet up occasionally to discuss ways in which they can raise awareness and participate in efforts to bring about positive change. Zero Waste Ireland is an active Facebook community of similarly like-minded people who share a concern about the effects of waste- which is a by-product of consumption, on the environment and the long-term sustainability of the planet in which we live.

Prior to conducting the interviews, following the advice of (Silverman, 2000) a pilot study was conducted with a work colleague to test different styles of questioning. The actual

interviews were conducted over the period August 6th –18th 2017. Of the total number of eight participants, members of Plastic Awareness Ireland and Zero Waste Ireland yielded four participants and the remaining four were selected from a convenience sample of friends and acquaintances of the researcher. In total five of the sample were female and three were male with ages ranging between 24 and 43. Where possible the interviews occurred in the participants homes at a pre-arranged quiet time to minimise the risk of disruption or distraction. This was not practicable for the members of Plastic Awareness Ireland and Zero Waste Ireland who were not known to the researcher and therefore it was deemed more appropriate to interview these in a quiet space within a public café or bar.

Although there was no pre-determined list of questions to work through a list of discussion items was compiled in advance of the interviews taking place (*Appendix 1*).

Interviewees were also encouraged to talk freely about events, behaviour and beliefs surrounding ethical consumption. In line with previous research into the attitude- behaviour gap in the ethical consumption context the focus of the interviews was on actual past behaviour of consumers rather than on their attitudes or future behaviour (Papaoikonomou, et al., 2011). Interviewees were asked to talk about occasions where they did not act according to their ethical principles and to elaborate on the reasons for this.

The interviews ranged between 20 minutes and 50 minutes in length and all were audio-recorded and later transcribed to facilitate analysis of the raw data.

Table 3 - Details of Interview participants

Participant 1 Male, Age: 43 Not affiliated with an ethical organisation Education: University Graduate	Participant 2 Female, Age: 42 Not affiliated with an ethical organisation Education: University Graduate
Participant 3 Female, Age: 30 Plastic Awareness Ireland Member Education: University Graduate	Participant 4 Female, Age: 40 Zero Waste Ireland Member Education: University Graduate
Participant 1 Female, Age: 24 Zero Waste Ireland Member Education: University Graduate	Participant 6 Female, Age: 39 Plastic Awareness Ireland member Education: University Graduate
Participant 7 Male, Age: 42 Not affiliated with an ethical organisation Education: University Graduate	Participant 8 Male, Age: 43 Not affiliated with an ethical organisation Education: University Graduate

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participants were assured from the outset that they would be guaranteed anonymity. This was also re-affirmed at the time of interview where it was reiterated that any responses to questions would only be used and quoted anonymously. They were also assured that the research related to an MSc research project and that none of the data collected was to be used for any other purpose. In relation to the audio recordings and transcripts they were also given assurances that they could receive a copy of these if so requested.

3.8 Limitations of Methodology

Despite precautionary steps taken during the research process- (e.g. interviewers focus on past behaviour etc) the likelihood of social desirable responding occurring is a significant one. It has been suggested that to reduce the effect of social desirability bias occurrence a combination of methods should be used rather than relying exclusively on one method (Auger & Devinney, 2007). Owing to time and resource constraints this was not a suggestion that could be enacted however.

It is also acknowledged that the small number of respondents in this study means that the resultant findings cannot be generalised to the overall population. This however is often presented as a limitation of qualitative research in general (Saunders, et al., 2012) and is not unique to this particular research project.

It is also important to note that a qualitative methodological approach both in the collection and in the interpretation of data leaves oneself open to criticism that one's own personal biases, values and background will invariably affect the resultant findings (Creswell, 2009). While acknowledged here, cognisance of this was taken throughout the research process to mitigate the likelihood of this occurring.

3.9 Data Analysis Method

Data analysis was conducted in accordance with the interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach which underpins this research project. The chosen method- thematic analysis has been described as a "foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Those same authors point to its flexibility as one of its main benefits while also acknowledging that this flexibility leaves the method open to criticism if clear and concise guidelines in its application has not been adhered to. (Braun & Clarke, 2006) propose six phases of thematic analysis (adapted in Table 4 below) which have been adhered to in the analysis and evaluation of the findings which are presented in Chapter 4.

Table 4: Phases of thematic analysis

Phase:	Description of the process:
Familiarising yourself with the data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme. Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis
Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Source: (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Audio recordings of the interviews were listened to and then re-listened to and key ideas and detailed transcribing of quotes were noted. Eventually as familiarisation with the raw data grew certain themes began to emerge. More apparent themes were labelled as ‘major themes’ and other less prominent- though still present themes were labelled as ‘minor themes’. Each of these themes were then categorised in accordance with each of the research objectives set out in section 3.2. A summary of these themes is set out in the tables below.

Table 5: Research Objective 1 Themes

<p>Research Objective 1:</p> <p><i>To understand consumers attitudes to ethical consumption in the Irish consumption context</i></p>
<p>Themes:</p> <p>Variance in the degree to which consumers identify as ethical</p> <p>The focus of ethical concern varies from individual to individual</p> <p>Being an ethical consumer is an evolving process that requires ongoing commitment</p>

Table 6: Research Objective 2 Themes

<p>Research Objective 2:</p> <p><i>To understand the factors that mediate between consumers who express pro-ethical attitudes and their actual ethical consumption behaviour.</i></p>
<p>Themes:</p> <p>Price</p> <p>Lack of Information</p> <p>Lack of Availability</p> <p>Scepticism</p> <p>Time Pressures (minor)</p> <p>Habit (minor)</p>

Table 7: Research Objective 3 Themes

<p>Research Objective 3:</p> <p><i>To assess which barriers are perceived as the most relevant in hampering the purchase of ethical products for those consumers who identify as having pro-ethical consumption attitudes.</i></p>
<p>Themes:</p> <p>N/A</p>

Chapter 4 -Findings

In this chapter, the findings from the eight interviews which were conducted between the 6th and the 18th of August are presented. The themes which emerged from the data analysis outlined in section 3.9 are presented below.

4.1 Research Objective 1

The first research objective was to gain an understanding of consumers attitudes to ethical consumption in the Irish consumption context. Analysis of the interview data led to the identification of three themes. Firstly, there was variance in the degree to which consumers identify as ethical. Secondly, the focus of ethical concern tended to vary from individual to individual. Finally, a sense emerged from the interviews that being an ethical consumer requires commitment and effort and interviewees tend to believe they are still evolving in their ethicality. Each of these three themes are examined in more detail below.

4.1.1 Variance in the degree to which consumers identify as ethical

In the discussions with the interviewees it became clear that all regarded themselves as ethically minded to some extent. While this was more pronounced in the case of interviewees who were members of either Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland, some of the other interviewees whilst offering the view that they consider themselves to be ethically minded were less sure about whether or not they were putting this into practice, as the following introspective quote details:

"I would like to think so but if you just look at what I am wearing at the moment I am not wearing anything that was produced in my own country so I would like to think that the clothes that I buy is coming from somewhere that has good ethics in terms of producing the textile and shipping it to another country but based on what I am wearing at the moment I couldn't say that I was"

(Interviewee 8, male).

One of the interviewees remarked on the gap between the possession of a positive intention towards ethical consumption and actual ethical purchase behaviour:

“People have an ethically minded implication or a wish to be ethically minded but it might not necessarily translate into action yet” (Interviewee 6, female).

One of the more committed ethical consumers questioned the degree to which others are truly ethical:

“In some cases, people saying that they want to do it is almost the same as doing it for them but they are not committed to it” (Interviewee 3, female).

4.1.2 The focus of ethical concern varies from individual to individual

A salient theme to emerge from the data was that interviewees tend to focus on different ethical concerns which perhaps reflects the fact noted in the literature that ethical consumption is a broad area. While most of the interviewees referenced sustainability issues in one form or another one of the interviewees in the stories they recounted concentrated on the over-use of plastic which could be considered a subset of this. Many of the interviewees focussed on organic produce while somewhat fewer focussed on factors such as the fair treatment of producers and workers employed in the production chain. One interviewee spoke about wanting to avoid buying shares or a pension that invested in alcohol or cigarette manufacturers, another associated ethical issues with third world issues, while another cited the following belief:

“I would consider locally sourced as ethical- the product of your region and country” (Interviewee 8, male).

Interviewees also pointed out certain instances of duality when it came to taking certain ethical standpoints as demonstrated by the following statements:

“A product may be organic but not fair-traded” (Interviewee 1, male).

“Recently I was buying asparagus from Peru and I’m going em,.. well that’s not the most local vegetable you could buy but what impact is that having on the farmer in Peru that you are not buying from” (Interviewee 5, Female).

4.1.3 Being an ethical consumer is an evolving process that requires ongoing commitment

A theme that emerged from the data in the interviews was that being an ethical consumer requires commitment and that interviewees see it as an evolving process. Some of the interviewees framed their ethical purchase behaviour in terms of being on a journey as illustrated by the following two quotes:

“I wouldn’t call myself an ethical purchaser- I’d call myself a shopper that’s on the way to being an ethical shopper” (Interviewee 6, female).

“In terms of my own behaviour I think it’s been incremental and that I’ve been doing it sort of bit by bit and it hasn’t been an overnight change where I became a zero-waste person overnight” (Interviewee 5, female).

In terms of the commitment involved, interviewees offered the following insights into the effort and conscious decision- making involved in being ethical in their consumption behaviour:

“You have to weigh up several aspects so if its available second hand you are not contributing to a new garment being created you are just side-tracking one that is already sitting in a charity shop but if you’re buying it in a shop you are the cause for that garment being created so then you have to think more carefully about it because nothing is perfect even if it’s made from sustainable material” (Interviewee 3, female).

“I never buy plastic bottled water in the city or anywhere- I always carry a glass bottle with me, fill it from a tap you know” (Interviewee 6, female).

“You have to plan which shop you are going to go to, maybe it’s a further one because most of the time you have to travel further to get stuff into your own containers” (Interviewee 6, female).

4.2 Research Objective 2

Research objective two is concerned with understanding the factors that mediate between consumers who express pro-ethical attitudes and their actual ethical consumption behaviour. A number of themes emerged from the interview data. Major themes to emerge were price, lack of information and lack of availability. Less significant factors emerged as minor themes in the interview data; these were scepticism, time pressures and habit. Each of these themes are presented in more detail below.

4.2.1 Price (major theme)

A major theme to emerge from the interviews relates to the importance of price as a mediating factor in the purchase behaviour of ethical shoppers. Price was mentioned as a factor by each of the interviewees. In some instances, interviewees spoke about how much extra they would be prepared to pay for the ethical alternative as in the following example:

“if there wasn’t a huge price difference I would go for it but then again it would have to be within reason so I would be conscious but at the same time if it was double the price I probably wouldn’t but if it was 20% more I probably would” (Interviewee 1, male).

Some of the interviewees spoke about a perception which exists that ethical alternatives are more expensive rather than stating it as a definitive fact:

“I think in Ireland it is perceived that it is a bit more posh or expensive to consume organic products and I think an average consumer wouldn’t be able to afford it” (Interviewee 4, female).

“I think price comes into it because generally a product that advertises itself as made ethically or sourced locally or produced in an ethical environment in terms of the employees of that company being paid a fair wage or the company itself in terms of how it sources its own suppliers well there is a perception that that is going to cost you more” (Interviewee 7, male).

Some of the more committed purchasers of ethical products amongst the Plastic Awareness Ireland and Zero Waste Ireland groups chose to take a more holistic view in relation to the issue of price by focussing on the overall amount that they spent due to changes in lifestyle rather than framing it as a one or the other comparison between the ethical and non-ethical alternative as is exemplified by the following quote:

“I’m living on a lot less money because I made the changes on the cleaning products, in toiletries, in clothes and electronics and things like that, because I’m not spending money on all those areas I can afford to eat organic everything” (Interviewee 3, female).

It was also notable that some of the interviewees made the connection between the price of ethical alternatives and peoples earnings and disposable income:

“if your living at the lower end of society where you have less earnings I’d say not. I’d say if you’ve more disposable income then yes. I’d consider myself middle class and we have the luxury of being able to make those decisions more than others...am if you were at the higher end again you could afford to make more decisions around that again” (Interviewee 1, male).

“I think people with more disposable income may be in a position to have more choice” (Interviewee 7, male).

4.2.2 Lack of Information (major theme)

A major theme that emerged in the interviewee data surrounded a lack of information which led to difficulties for interviewees in executing their ethical intentions. This lack of information encompassed different forms from a general lack of reliable information in the media as exemplified in the comment below:

“It’s hard to actually find reliable information or even hard to know where to start to find that information” (Interviewee 7, male)

Other interviewees spoke about a lack of information in the way in which ethical alternatives were signposted in-store and many focussed on the actual product labels themselves:

“Sometimes you don’t know the origins of the products.....you don’t have enough information” (Interviewee 2, female)

“The country of origin needs to be more prominent on the labels for a start.....I think there could be better labelling” (Interviewee 8, male)

“I think it would be good to have more information about the products for example in Germany there was a big campaign about GMO’s which is Genetically modified products and I think they have labels as well on these kind of products..em.. whether they contain or don’t GMO’s but in Ireland there is very little awareness about labelling because in other countries they have sections- for example this is the vegan section which makes it easier to know- but here everything is mixed” (Interviewee 4, female).

Not all the interviewees felt that the issue with labelling was straightforward as illustrated by the following interviewee who offered the view that consumers are saturated with labels and that attempts by retailers to address this in the past have not received the desired response:

“The simplest thing that comes to mind is the labelling of the product but I also think there is a big problem with that because people are already saturated with labels which mean different things and they may not be aware of it” (Interviewee 5, female).

“I think a few years ago Tesco had a carbon footprint done for their products which they scrapped because people just weren’t interested” (Interviewee 5, female).

Another interviewee linked the lack of information issue with the issue of price sensitivity towards ethical alternatives:

“Sometimes it’s a bit more expensive which can be off-putting for people if there’s not that much motivation in people but I suppose it comes back to a lack of information because if they had more information they wouldn’t mind paying that bit extra” (Interviewee 6, female).

4.2.3 Lack of Availability (major theme)

Issues around the lack of availability was another major theme to emerge from the interview data. This represented a practical difficulty with finding stores that sold ethical products or the ethical alternative not being available in the quantity that the interviewees sought:

“In Dublin, there are still not enough places where you can buy the unpackaged product- you can really count them on the fingers of one hand and ideally each village- you know Crumlin, Kimmage, Rathfarnham should have a place like that” (Interviewee 6, female).

“There are few things that the supermarket does that does not contain packaging....there are few times you can buy loose tomatoes....you don’t have an option really” (Interviewee 2, female).

“If the product isn’t marketed well, if it’s not available or not clear on the shelf – if your eye isn’t drawn to it you are not going to buy it anyway” (Interviewee 1, male).

4.2.4 Scepticism (minor)

Scepticism did not emerge as a theme in the discussions with the interviewees who were either members of Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland; it did however emerge as a theme in the other interviews. This was expressed not as downright opposition but as a feeling of doubt on the part of the interviewees. These concerns are encapsulated by the following statements:

“it’s probably something that is on my mind but I don’t know really where to start or whether I can make a difference...sometimes I even think is it too late, or is my small effort going to make a difference?” (Interviewee 7, male).

“I think there is a scepticism now that companies are saying they are ethical and they are getting street kids and gangs off the streets and getting them to pick coffee beans and all this and there’s a scepticism that it’s just a marketing ploy to tap into this whole thing now” (Interviewee 7, male).

“I just have this doubt about it and I don’t know where it comes from or where it stems from but I’ve picked it up from somewhere” (Interviewee 7, male).

“Even though they might say that the farmers are getting well treated and well paid for their product that is one of the items that I would still question even though it advertises itself as ethically sourced or whatever I would still have reservations” (Interviewee 8, male).

4.2.5 Time Pressures (minor theme)

A theme that emerged in the interviews was the notion that time pressures or constraints sometimes arose as a situational factor that created an obstacle to the execution of an ethical intention. It could be argued that this mediating factor is closely related to the availability one mentioned above under 4.2.3. The relevance of time pressure as a mediating factor was expressed as follows by one of the interviewees:

“I suppose there are times and you have plans for dinner and some products are wrapped in plastic but you need them at that time and you are under pressure and you buy them” (Interviewee 6, female).

“In work, I only have a half hour lunch break so sometimes I go for a salad that is going to be packaged in plastic” (Interviewee 6, female).

Another interviewee mentioned time pressures as a co-factor along with price:

“I think one of the biggest factors is cost- at the end of the day we all have good intentions when it comes to buying sustainably and ethically but when it comes down to it and when people have to make a quick decision and they are looking at two items side by side often cost will over-rule any good intentions that they have.” (Interviewee 5, female).

4.2.6 Habit (minor theme)

The notion of peoples shopping behaviour being dictated by forces of habit was a noticeable minor theme in the interviewee data. The following statements from interviewees sums this up:

“A lot of the time we choose the brands we trust and that we used when we were kids- if our own mothers chose those brands it gives us trust in those brands because we grew up with them”
(Interviewee 2, female).

“I suppose it depends on the purchase you’re going to make, I mean if it’s something quick and simple like a food purchase I think people will stick to their old habits; I think if it’s something with a longer-term intention or more expensive maybe people will do a bit more research first.”
(Interviewee 5, female).

“Your habits slow you down a lot because you have certain habits and they are old habits and its known that it’s hard to change them all that quickly” (Interviewee 6, female).

“You get into a routine of going to a particular place and then not even questioning or worrying about it” (Interviewee 8, male).

4.3 Research Objective 3

The aim of Research objective 3 is to identify the barriers which are perceived as most relevant in hampering the purchase of ethical products for those consumers who identify as

having pro-ethical consumption attitudes. This research objective aims to build on research objective 2 by ordering the barriers according to their importance. Price and lack of information emerged as the joint most dominant themes with lack of availability judged to be the next most important. This is examined in more detail below.

As previously noted in section 4.2 - price, lack of information and lack of availability have each been identified as major themes in the interviewee data. Of these price and lack of information was a factor that was mentioned in the course of the discussion with all eight interviewees. In several of the interviews these factors were mentioned on two or more occasions in the same interview. One interviewee bemoaned the lack of information for a dearth of awareness surrounding the availability of ethical alternatives and then when probed further later in the interview stressed that:

“it all again comes down to not enough information” (Interviewee 6, female).

Of the eight interviewees, six of them mentioned the lack of availability of ethical product alternatives as a barrier to their own ethical purchase behaviour which led to this being categorised as the third most relevant factor that hampers the purchase of ethical products.

4.4 Summary of Key Findings

It is clear from the research that overall interviewees proclaimed an ethically minded attitude. This was expected of the four interviewees who are members of Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland. While there was no expectation of the same from the other four interviewees, they too expressed a pro-ethical attitude although some of these were less certain in their pro-ethical declarations. It was also clear that the focus of ethical concern varied quite a deal across the eight interviewees with a range of concerns being raised. A strong theme to emerge was the idea that to be truly ethical required a great deal of commitment and many of the interviewees saw themselves as evolving or being on a journey towards being more ethical consumers.

The mediating factors that emerged between interviewees pro-ethical attitudes and their actual ethical consumption behaviour were price, lack of information, lack of availability, scepticism, time pressures and habit with price, lack of information and lack of availability being the most significant of these.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

In this chapter, the findings revealed in the previous chapter are analysed in detail and discussed in the context of, and with reference to the extant literature on the factors that contribute to the gap between ethical consumption attitudes and actual ethical consumption behaviour.

5.1 Attitudes to ethical consumption in the Irish consumption context

All of the interviewees proclaimed themselves to have pro-ethical consumption attitudes to some extent. Each of them were able to talk about ethical issues that were of concern to them with little probing. It emerged from the interview data that there was a variance in the strength of the pro-ethical attitudes between different interviewees however. Two of the interviewees who admitted that they currently did not purchase in accordance with their ethically held attitudes all that often when asked about specific past behaviours, tended to fall back on speaking about future intentions or hypothetical situations. It cannot be guaranteed also that an element of socially-desirable bias had not led to the interviewees expressing pro-ethical attitudes in the first place. In contrast, most of the other interviewees were able to draw on more specific instances of past behaviour. In addition to this the interviewees that showed a stronger pro-ethical consumption attitude were often more animated when they spoke about their ethical beliefs.

The ethical concerns referenced by the interviewees ranged over a broad area. Most referenced sustainability issues of one form or another but the particular focus within this tended to differ from one interviewee to the next. Many mentioned the widespread use of plastics as product wrapping while one individual focussed on over-consumption in its entirety as their main area of concern. The lack of availability of organic produce was a focus of concern for some of the interviewees while for others the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation often featured as a concern. There were also mentions for both producers and worker's rights involved in the production chain.

There were also seeming contradictions in the findings such as the interviewee who expressed the view that buying Irish was the most ethical thing to do on the basis that by

buying from the developing world exploitation would inevitably occur somewhere along the chain. That some of the interviewees pointed out their own uncertainty around what is the more ethical option in different shopping scenarios (e.g. buying asparagus from Peru vs buying a more locally-sourced alternative) would appear to lend weight to the view of (Moraes, et al., 2012) that the broad range of ethical consumption can lead to internal tensions for the would-be ethical consumer.

The range of ethical concerns elicited in the interviews suggests that ethical consumption as a construct is open to individual interpretation and defies an objective all-encompassing definition. The study would appear to confirm the view expressed by (Devinney, et al., 2010) that the broadness of ethical consumption as a subject of enquiry makes it difficult to operationalise from a research point of view.

A strong sense emerged from the interviews that being truly ethical in ones behaviour requires a great deal of conscious commitment. It was also noticeable that this level of commitment varied between participants. Of the eight interviewees- Interviewee no. 3 was easily the most ethical both in terms of her attitudes and her actual consumption behaviour. In the course of the conversation with her, it became clear just how consciously engaged she has become with the idea of consuming ethically to the point that it had become a part of her lifestyle. It was also evident that while she mentioned barriers to ethical consumption- just like all the other interviewees, she herself had personally overcome many of these barriers as evidenced by the following statement:

“you realise you need less things so you spend less time searching for things so it’s easier”
(Interviewee 3, female).

In a similar way, the same interviewee had consciously re-framed the issue of price by not comparing the ethical versus the non-ethical alternative on an item-by-item basis but instead took a holistic view of the overall reduction in the cost of her weekly shop as she had been able to eliminate the purchase of many items. What emerged from this interview is the idea that she has been able to significantly reduce her personal gap between ethical attitudes and actual consumption behaviour by displaying conscious commitment to the

behaviour. This would appear to lend credence to the theory postulated by (Carrington, et al., 2010) that having implementation intentions, i.e. putting a mental cognitive plan in place can help reduce the barriers between pro-ethical intentions and actual behaviour.

Other interviewees- particularly the remaining members of Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland spoke about their ethical consumption behaviour as something that was still evolving. For them the gap between their pro-ethical attitudes and actual behaviour still existed but membership of those groups helped as another step in educating themselves or overcoming their own lack of information about ethical alternatives.

5.2 The factors that mediate between consumers who express pro-ethical attitudes and their actual consumption behaviour

Price emerged as a major theme in the findings of this study which supports previous research findings in the literature e.g. (Bray, et al., 2011; Eckhardt, et al., 2010).

Interviewees comments would seem to suggest that consumers have a more nuanced view in relation to this issue though than it simply being one where they will automatically rule out the ethical alternative if it is more expensive. Two of the interviewees suggested without any prompting from the interviewer that they would be willing to pay 20% or 15-20% more respectively for the ethical product alternative which offers some support to the study conducted by (De Pelsmacker, et al., 2005) which found that consumers are willing to pay 10% more for Fair-Trade coffee.

Some of the interviewees suggested there was a perception that buying ethically was more expensive but they also offered the view that this is not always the case.

A lack of information was another strong over-riding barrier to ethical consumption that emerged from the interviews. This ranged from the general (e.g. regulatory bodies) to the specific (product labelling and in-store communication). One interviewee linked the lack of information issue directly to consumers price sensitivity towards ethical products citing the belief that if consumers were more aware of the merits of the ethical product option they would be more inclined to pay extra as a consequence. This corroborates one of the findings of (McDevitt, et al., 2007) that ethical product alternatives are not ascribed a proper

discriminating value in comparison with conventional brands because of poor communication. Another interviewee perhaps touched on the challenge in overcoming this when stating their belief that ethical product alternatives tend to fade into the background as they are in competition with heavily marketed non-ethical products from well-resourced manufacturers.

While interviewees were almost unanimous in their views that better labelling would aid in their ethical product decision-making, one of the interviewees offered the view that the current prevalence of labels is itself an issue as people feel overwhelmed and do not always understand what the labels mean.

The lack of availability of ethical product alternatives was another factor that was cited as a barrier to ethical purchasing in several of the interviews. While some of the interviewees bemoaned the lack of physical shops which sold ethical products, other interviewees cited the lack of availability of fruits and vegetables that were not wrapped in plastic packaging as a barrier to their ethical purchasing intentions. Some of the interviewees described the lengths they went to to overcome this such as carrying a glass bottle everywhere that they could refill with water rather than buying water in a disposable plastic container or leaving their shopping to the weekend when they had the time to visit the farmers market. These two examples from the interviews would once again seem to re-assert the importance of putting implementation intentions into effect in order to reduce the gap between the pro-ethical attitude and the actual ethical behaviour.

One of the interviewees who had lived abroad invoked a comparison with Germany citing her belief that buying organic produce was more embedded in the culture there and therefore it was easier to find ethical alternatives.

Scepticism was another theme to emerge in the interviews with this again being more prevalent amongst the interviewees who were not associated with the Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland groups. One of the interviewees was sceptical about how his 'small effort' could make a difference to the amount of damage that was being wrought on the environment. The same interviewee while giving an example of an advertisement where a well-known coffee brand advertises the work it does in helping young people to stay out of gangs by training them as coffee farmers questioned whether this was just a marketing

ploy. These findings would appear to corroborate some of the concerns collated in the 'green reservations' theme identified by (Johnstone & Tan, 2015) in their study into the purchasing gap in the green context. Previous research has found that 'greenwashing' which is the deceptive use of advertising or public relations to promote the perception that a company's products are environmentally friendly is positively associated with consumer scepticism (Aji & Sutikno, 2015). The findings here suggest that an ethical purchasing equivalent to the 'greenwashing' phenomenon also may exist and could act as a barrier to ethical consumption behaviour.

Time pressures did emerge from the interviews as a discernible and situation-specific theme that intervenes between ethical consumers intentions and their actual purchase behaviour. Interviewees spoke about being in a situation where they needed 'something quick' or being 'under pressure at the time'. This factor would seem to lend some weight to the intention-behaviour mediation framework proposed by (Carrington, et al., 2010) where situational context is postulated as a momentary intervening variable that occurs outside the would-be ethical consumers mind.

The notion of consumers falling back on old forces of habit emerged as a mediating factor from the interviews. Interestingly this was mentioned more often by interviewees who were members of Plastic Awareness Ireland or Zero Waste Ireland than the other interviewees which may suggest that they have simply tried to enact various ethical behaviours more often and thus encountered this problem.

5.3 Most relevant perceived barriers

While the interviewees spoke about a range of barriers that impede them in the execution of their positive attitudes towards consuming ethically there was a clear distinction between those factors which were considered most important and those that were considered less important. This manifested itself during the interview process by the ease at which almost all the interviewees offered up price, lack of information and lack of availability as reasons (usually citing specific past examples) for why they were not able to implement specific ethical behaviours from time to time. Typically, these reasons were offered up earlier on in most of the interviews and were often mentioned two or more times during the course of

each interview while some of the other barriers were mentioned less often and usually later on in the interview process.

What this suggests is that there are a hierarchy of factors which mediate between ethical consumption attitude and ethical consumption behaviour. This supports previous research which have suggested that consumers distinguish between core, central and peripheral factors when evaluating companies CSR initiatives (Oberseder, et al., 2011).

Chapter 6 – Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The overall aim of this study was to explore the factors that mediate between ethical consumption attitudes and actual ethical purchase behaviour in the Irish consumption context. Three research objectives were set out in pursuit of the overall aim. Each of these objectives have been achieved and it's felt the overall aim has likewise been fulfilled.

To conduct this research a qualitative methodology was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a part convenience and part purposive-based sample which facilitated a broad variety of insights.

The findings suggest that there is variance in the level of intensity of feeling or strength of attitude held by consumers towards ethical consumption. All of the interviewees did consider themselves to be ethical to a certain degree. One caveat in relation to these findings must be noted- which is that the likelihood of occurrence of socially-desirable bias in interviewees responses is significant. The findings also strongly suggest that consumers tend to focus on different ethical concerns which perhaps reflects the fact noted in the literature that ethical consumption is a broad area. A key insight emerged from the interviews that being truly ethical in ones behaviour requires a lot of conscious commitment.

The findings suggest the pre-eminence of price, lack of information and lack of availability as mediating factors between the possession of an ethical consumption attitude and actual ethical purchase behaviour. Other important factors to emerge were consumer scepticism, time pressure and the influence of existing forces of habit. While the findings reaffirm many of the findings of previous studies it is also notable that some previous studies findings were not replicated in this study. Neither peer influence or perceptions that ethical products were of a lesser quality were found to be significant in this study.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

This research project has identified some issues which warrant future study. As a qualitative study with a small sample size the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population of Ireland. Therefore, the external validity could be enhanced by conducting a similar study with a larger sample to determine if the findings are replicated. This study involved investigating consumers attitudes and behaviour towards ethical purchasing in its entirety; as this is a broad area with varying foci of concern for consumers more research should be conducted with a narrower focus e.g. the use of plastic packaging for the sale of fruit and veg. Finally, as many of the interviewees tended to regard their ethical consumption behaviour as still evolving, it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal study to explore how consumers insights into the relevance of various mediating factors alter and evolve over time.

For marketers, there are also a number of recommendations that can be offered based on the insights gained from this research. Although these findings are not generalisable to the overall population it does provide a degree of confidence that a greater market for ethical products exists if marketers pay attention to overcoming the barriers to ethical purchasing behaviour which have been identified. For example, to overcome the lack of information barrier, marketers should pay attention to ensuring that their products are labelled clearly in a way that identifies them as an ethical option. They should also work with retailers to ensure they are getting the best possible in-store location that ensures the ethical product is seen by the consumer. Marketers of ethical products should also ensure that the ethical benefits of their products are highlighted in their marketing communications; this will help overcome the problem associated with consumers making their purchase decision on price alone by focussing their mind on a different value proposition. Finally, as it has been revealed here ethical purchasing requires effort and commitment- therefore marketers should reference the efficacy of their ethical offerings in their marketing communications by reminding consumers that their products are making a difference and thus reinforce the positive behaviour.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Discussion Guide

Warm up/ General Discussion

Establish rapport, make interviewee feel relaxed etc

Main Discussion

This discussion is about shopping and decision making.

How often do you shop? For groceries? For other clothes? Do you impulse purchase or plan your purchasing in advance?

What are the main things you look out for or criteria you apply when deciding which product you choose at the supermarket?

What does ethical shopping mean to you? Can you give some examples?

Have you ever shopped according to your ethical beliefs or in accordance with any causes you mean? Why is this cause important to you?

Why do you purchase these products? What kind of characteristics do these products have?

Can you think of a time or and specific past incidents when you were unable to shop according to your ethical beliefs?

What do you think was preventing you? Was there any reason for this? Do any other reasons that you can think of come to mind?

Do you think there are times other people would consume differently or more ethically in different circumstances? What would encourage people to this?

1) Conclusion/ Debrief & Thanks

