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The Attitude-Behavior Hypothesis and Green Purchasing Behavior: Empirical Evidence from German Milk Consumers

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Keywords: willingness to pay, theory of planned behavior, green marketing, organic, sustainability

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Question
Buying green products like organic food is the most popular action to reduce an individual’s environmental impact (Isenhour 2010). The theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen 1991) is widely applied and acknowledged to explain such environmentally friendly behavior (Bamberg and Möser 2007). However, most studies either focus on intention as a proxy for behavior and/ or rely on self-reported survey data. Therefore, results are limited and might be vulnerable due to self-presentational biases (Gaes, Kalle and Tedeschi 1978), incorrect estimation of own behavior (Barber et al. 2012) and the potential difference between stated intention and actual purchasing (Sun and Morwitz 2010). Other studies analyze real purchasing behavior, but only focus on attitude as a key factor determining behavior (Hauser, Nussbeck and Jonas 2013; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist 2009). Therefore, it is still unclear if consumers’ environmental attitudes and self-reported green behavior are consistent with actual green purchasing behavior and which factors besides attitude exert an influence on the latter.

Method and Data
The paper develops a model which takes into account the major factors of TPB and conceptualizes willingness to pay (WTP) as perceived control. Stated attitudes and self-reported green behavior are contrasted to actual behavior.

Purchasing data was matched with survey data by using the household’s identification numbers and was observed for a period of one year (January 2012 – December 2012). Panel participants record their everyday purchases by using hand-scan devices that GfK provides to each panel household. Survey data is based on a standardized survey questionnaire which GfK annually distributes to all participating households. The questionnaire includes items on purchasing behavior, media consumption, everyday life, needs and leisure time activities. For the present study, only items referring to environmental topics and shopping behavior were taken into consideration.

Summary of Findings
Willingness to pay and personal norms account for more than half of the variance of self-reported green behavior. The effect of attitude on self-reported green behavior was insignificant. Although WTP and norms were able to explain self-reported green behavior accurately, self-reported green behavior in turn is no accurate predictor of actual green purchasing behavior. The low share of explained variance of actual green behavior can partially be explained by the higher costs of green products, which often are suggested as a major barrier.

The findings address major issues in green consumer research. First, self-reported behavior is not able to adequately depict actual behavior. Second, even though all the central constructs of TPB were included into the analysis, the study’s results question the completeness of the theory. This implies that further constructs need to be integrated into TPB to enhance its predictive power in the context of green purchasing behavior. Impulsive components or situational factors might contribute to explaining actual purchasing behavior. Especially in the case of organic products, con-
cerns of personal health or self-benefits might play an important role as well.

**Key Contributions**

A full model with main drivers of green consumption is developed with explicitly identifying willingness to pay as a major perceived behavioral control. Stated attitudes and self-reported green behavior are contrasted to actual behavior. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this research is the first empirical demonstration of these associations.

The findings advance the understanding of green consumption behavior in the food sector. A gap between self-reported behavior and actual behavior was observed. The main reason for the gap is likely to be one which especially emerges in the field of environmentally sustainable or “green” consumption: Consumers are hardly able to assess the environmental impact of products correctly which leads to a gap between the subjective and objective assessment. Hence, self-reported green behavior might not reflect actual behavior because consumers do not know any better. This puts the discussion of the green gap into a new direction.

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References are available on request.