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Ethical Drivers of Environmentally Responsible B2B Purchasing: An Empirical Research in the Swedish Food Retail Industry*

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Abstract

Businesses play a central role in addressing environmental sustainability, and one of their most difficult internal decisions is whether to commit to environmentally responsible purchasing. This study develops a theoretical framework to explain what drives purchasing professionals in Sweden's food retail industry to engage in environmentally responsible purchasing. The study addresses a gap in the literature, where most prior research has examined sustainable purchasing at the firm or supply chain level, while the role of individual buyers' moral beliefs and their organizational context in B2B retail settings has received less attention. The framework is tested using survey data from 573 purchasing managers in the Swedish food retail sector, based on established measures of moral philosophy, ethical decision-making, attitudes and environmentally responsible purchasing behavior. The findings show that all proposed hypotheses are supported, indicating that moral beliefs, together with situational and organizational influences, play a key role in individuals' environmentally responsible decision making within organizations. Together, these results highlight how companies can encourage environmentally responsible purchasing by supporting the moral beliefs of purchasers and the ethical influence of top managers and peers.

Keywords: Environmentally responsible purchasing, Moral philosophy, Food retail, Sweden

Introduction

Over the past few decades, firms have become key actors in efforts to promote sustainable development (Laroche et al., 2001; Han et al., 2009; Foo, 2021). For many organizations, preserving the environment while maintaining economic growth has become a top priority (Carter & Jennings, 2011; Miemczyk et al., 2012; Johnsen et al., 2017). Few would doubt the potential power of organizations to effect environmental changes. Organizations, together with consumers, are increasingly considering longer-term social and environmental issues when they consume, purchase, or supply goods and services.

Accordingly, many leading companies around the world became convinced that finding new ideas to meet the challenges of sustainability would be a key part of their future. Due to a dramatic increase in environmental consciousness worldwide, it is becoming increasingly acknowledged that organizations need to manage not only their own environmental impacts but also those of their entire supply chain (Chkanikova & Lehner, 2015; Chkanikova, 2016). In response to growing pressure from stakeholders to address economic, environmental and social issues, many firms have committed to integrate sustainable development principles into their operations (Searcy, 2009; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018). To operationalize these commitments, companies have introduced a wide range of policies, plans and programs, and many have established sustainability requirements in their purchasing policies. This shift is mirrored in the evolving role of the purchasing function. The operational implication is that

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the purchasing function has expanded from strictly ensuring a lowest unit price to becoming more value chain-oriented (van Weele, 2000; Leire & Mont, 2010; Schulze & Bals, 2020). Consequently, organizational buying behavior has witnessed transformations to be compatible with sustainable development and environmental responsibility of firms. Firms have recognized that the purchasing function is an important resource for attaining high-quality sustainable development (Carr & Pearson, 2002; Schulze & Bals, 2020), which reveals opportunities for purchasing executives to become key contributors to an organization's sustainability and environmental consciousness (Rodriguez et al., 2006; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018). The purchasing function is therefore central for work with sustainability considerations. It is here that a purchasing unit develops, sets up, and puts into operation the standards that are used in sustainable purchasing.

Sustainable purchasing strategies are widely regarded as a way to strengthen customer approval and support long-term profitability (Sharma et al., 2010). However, achieving sustainable purchasing is not something an organization can accomplish in isolation; it depends on the engagement of employees across the organization, and particularly of key decision makers (Lozano, 2007; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018). Advancement of sustainable purchasing typically requires at least one influential actor who has both the authority and the motivation to initiate sustainability initiatives. Since the purchasing function is recognized as an important resource for obtaining sustainable competitive advantages (Carr & Pearson, 2002; Schulze & Bals, 2020), it offers opportunities for purchasing executives to become business key contributors (Rodriguez et al., 2006; Ferri & Pedrini, 2018) who provide firms with competitive advantages through effective management of purchasing decisions (Narasimham et al., 2001; Schulze & Bals, 2020).

In this process, purchasing professionals must consider the ultimate disposition of the materials and components that enter the organization, and relevant sustainability issues need to be considered as part of the purchasing and procurement process (Park & Stoel, 2005).

Prior research highlights that key individuals play a decisive role in shaping and enacting corporate policies on sustainable purchasing (Maclagan, 1999; Ko et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2023). Viewing sustainable purchasing in this way highlights the importance of individual values and motives. Accordingly, this study examines how individual decision makers (i.e. purchasing professionals) make environmental purchasing decisions, with specific attention to how personal sources of influence shape their decision-making process.

Hence, the study asks:

which factors drive environmentally responsible purchasing among purchasing professionals in the retail industry?

Research Model and Hypotheses

Despite the valuable role that the purchasing function can play in an organization's environmental activities, research is only now beginning to emerge in this area. Thus, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate the key factors that can affect a purchasing executive's environmental endeavors in the Swedish retail industry, as there have been relatively few studies comparing the operating activities of the more environmentally involved European organizations to those of other organizations.

To address this research question, the study draws on established business ethics theories to examine how purchasing professionals process environmental purchasing decisions within their organizational context. Classical ethical decision-making models have largely emphasized the cognitive dimension of individual decision making (Trevino, 1986; Ferrell et al., 1989; Jones, 1991). These frameworks typically assume that business decision makers engage in a complex, rational analysis of their organizational environment. They describe ethical decision making as a cognitive process formed by multiple factors, including moral values, attitudes, knowledge, peers and superiors, incentive structures, and codes of ethics (Park & Stoel, 2005). Other recent work suggests that ethical decisions are not purely cognitive; instead, emotions and reasoning interact in shaping ethical choices (Bos & Willmott, 2001; Gaudine & Thorne, 2001).

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) integrates prior models from consumer behavior and business ethics (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Forsyth, 1980; Park & Stoel, 2005; Maignan et al., 2005; Ko et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2023) to consider both cognitive and affective aspects of attitude formation and behavioral change in an ethical buying context.

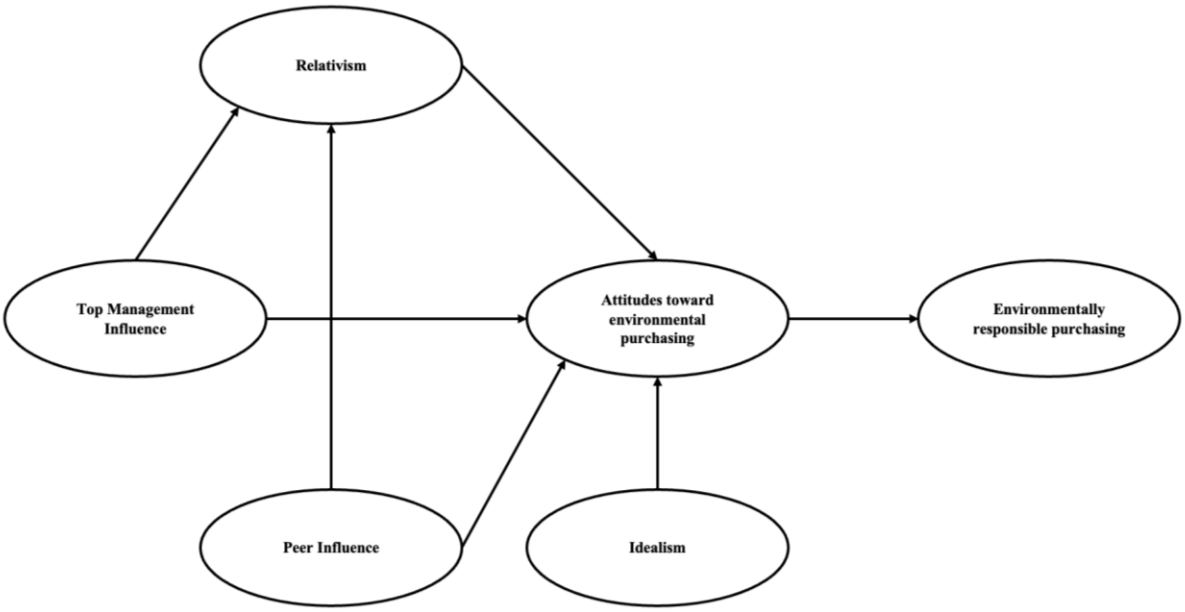

Fig 1. The Research Model

The model assumes that individuals draw on different moral philosophies when confronted with ethical decisions (Al Khatib et al., 2005). These philosophies are commonly represented along two dimensions of personal moral ideology: idealism and relativism (Forsyth, 1980; O'Boyle & Forsyth, 2021). Individuals who are high in relativism are more likely to reject the possibility of formulating or relying on universal moral rules when making ethical judgments. Conversely, those who are low in relativism believe in moral absolutes or universal rules that govern right and wrong behavior in all situations. Moreover, individuals high in idealism seek humanitarian solutions when facing ethical decisions, and those low in this dimension tend to believe that certain actions are ethical, even in cases where others are harmed.

Differences in idealism and relativism help explain why individuals diverge in their ethical beliefs. According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), attitudes are ultimately grounded in underlying beliefs in a sense that changes in beliefs lead to shifts in attitudes. Thus, this research predicted that idealism positively, and relativism negatively, influences environmentally responsible purchasing indirectly through attitudes:

H1: Attitudes toward environmental purchasing directly influence environmentally responsible purchasing.

H2: Idealism directly and positively influences attitudes toward environmental purchasing.

H3: Relativism directly and negatively influences attitudes toward environmental purchasing.

Relativistic norms are shaped in part by observing how significant others behave within the organization (Park & Stoel, 2005). This social influence tends to be particularly strong for individuals with more relativistic orientations. Consequently, ethical behavior is seen as emerging from the interaction between individual level beliefs and situational or organizational factors (Higgins et al., 1984; Trevino, 1986). Within organizations, roles such as peers and top managers can influence beliefs, attitudes and ultimately environmentally responsible purchasing. Because of these organizational influences, idealism tends to remain stable, whereas relativism is more susceptible to change. Therefore, the proposed research model hypothesized that:

H4: Perceived top management's sustainability responsibility directly influences relativism.

H5: Perceived top management's sustainability responsibility directly influences attitudes toward environmental purchasing.

H6: Perceived peers' ethics and social responsibility directly influence relativism.

H7: Perceived peers' ethics and social responsibility directly influence attitudes toward environmental purchasing.

Research Methodology

The empirical setting is the Swedish food retail industry. Sweden is a high-income economy (World Bank, 2025) with substantial consumption levels and a mature retail sector. The Swedish retail sector, the largest in Scandinavia, has a strong historical record of growth driven by steady population growth and rising incomes (Stockholm Business Region, 2025). This context provides a meaningful setting for investigating the organizational and moral drivers of environmentally responsible purchasing.

To measure the model different scales were adapted and used in this study. In 1980, Forsyth designed a questionnaire incorporating a measure of individual differences in ethical perspectives, along with the two dimensions described by Schlenker and Forsyth (1977) known as the ethics position questionnaire (EPQ) (Forsyth, 1980). Although this measure was originally developed by psychologists, it has been extended to, and found appropriate for, use in business contexts. Barnett et al. (1994) employed Forsyth's (1980) EPQ to examine the influence of ideology on ethical judgments in a business context, and O'Boyle & Forsyth (2021) retested it, and showed how the choice of moral philosophy framework remains current. Zaikauskaite et al. (2020) established connection between EPQ variables and environmentally responsible purchasing highlighting that idealists judge environmental issues more severe than and behave more pro-environmentally. This questionnaire was the basis of measuring idealism and relativism in this research.

Moreover, in this study, attitude toward ethics and social responsibility was measured by the existing perceived role of ethics and social responsibility (PRESOR) scale (Singhapakdi et al., 1996a, 1996b; Etheredge, 1999; Vitell et al., 2010). The purpose of PRESOR studies was to develop and validate a scale to measure managers' perceptions of the role of ethics and social responsibility in achieving organizational effectiveness. The instrument consists of items selected to reflect different dimensions of ethics and social responsibility within an organization and the importance of ethics and social responsibility relative to conventional criterion measures of organizational effectiveness (Etheredge, 1999).

Moreover, to measure the actual environmental purchasing of professionals, based on social screening criteria used by socially responsible investing firms, the previously developed measure by Park and Stoel (2005) were used. Their scale consisted of three dimensions: environment, employment, and human rights and consumer safety. Each respondent was asked to indicate the degree to which he or she considers each issue for all purchases in general. The environment section of this scale was chosen for the purpose of this research.

In total, a five-page questionnaire was distributed to 1,532 purchasing professionals in the Swedish food retail sector. Two waves of data collection resulted in 573 usable responses, corresponding to a response rate of 37.4%.

Data Analysis and Results

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal components and Varimax rotation was applied to explore and validate the dimensionality of the measurement scales. Items with factor loadings below 0.40 were dropped (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), and factors with eigenvalues below 1.0 were not kept (Hair et al., 2010). Then, CFA using maximum likelihood estimation was conducted on all latent variables with structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS 20 to validate the factors proposed by EFA.

After confirming unidimensionality, internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with all constructs exceeding the 0.70 threshold (Hair et al., 2007). All average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeded the corresponding squared inter-construct correlations, which supports discriminant validity for the latent constructs (Hair et al., 2010). Finally, the construct reliabilities as another indicator of convergent validity were all above the limit of .7, which suggests very high reliability (Hair et al., 2010). Together, these results demonstrate that the scale had sufficient levels of reliability and unidimensionality, the items adequately reflected their corresponding constructs, and all the scales exhibited convergent validity.

To be able to test the hypotheses, the final step of the analysis process was to evaluate the structural model and its validity, having all the items evaluated in the measurement models. The results of the analysis demonstrate that the structural model fits the data well (see Table 1).

Table 1: Fit index for structural model (Chi-square= 1082.640, P= .000)

Model	RMSEA	CMIN/DF	GFI	AGFI	TLI	CFI	NFI
Default model	.041	1.844	.900	.882	.966	.968	.934

Since evidence exists of adequate model fit and satisfactory reliability and validity, it is suitable to proceed with testing the hypotheses using SEM. The findings of the statistical tests done in AMOS 20 for evaluating hypotheses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesized Relationship			Standardized Estimate	CR	P	Hypothesis Test
Peer Influence	→	Relativism	-.299	-6.882	***	Supported
Top Management Influence	→	Relativism	-.355	-7.974	***	Supported
Relativism	→	Attitude toward ERP	-.225	-4.867	***	Supported
Idealism	→	Attitude toward ERP	.306	7.179	***	Supported
Top Management Influence	→	Attitude toward ERP	.135	3.123	.002	Supported
Peer Influence	→	Attitude toward ERP	.358	8.075	***	Supported
Attitude toward ERP	→	ERP	.647	13.017	***	Supported

The findings show that all proposed hypotheses are supported. Peer influence ($t = 8.075$, $p < .001$), top management influence ($t = 3.123$, $p < .01$) and idealism ($t = 7.179$, $p < .001$) are positively associated with attitudes toward ERP, whereas relativism is negatively related to these attitudes ($t = –4.867$, $p < .001$). Top management and peers also significantly reduce relativism, and attitudes toward ERP strongly predict actual environmentally responsible purchasing ($t = 13.017$, $p < .001$).

Conclusions and Implications

This research conceptualized and empirically tested a model for understanding, investigating, and predicting environmentally responsible decision making of purchasing professionals within organizations. It investigated the process of environmentally responsible purchasing decision making by incorporating business ethics and attitude theories from both the cognitive and affective nature of decision-making's points of view. The model offers insight into the drivers of attitudes and behavior in this context, positing a relationship between cognitive and emotional variables based on individual and situational aspects. Based on the findings, the factors of attitude, relativism, idealism, peers, and top management influence were proposed as possible drivers of environmentally responsible purchasing. All of these relationships were empirically tested in response to the research question of this study. The results of this study demonstrate how these factors influence ERP and provide support that all the proposed hypotheses are acceptable in the context of environmentally responsible purchasing at the individual level in organizations.

The main theoretical contribution is that constructs previously examined separately in different ethical decision-making studies are integrated into a single model and tested empirically. This study has implications for the field of business ethics. First, the body of research has been devoted to the field of environmental responsibility, while most similar studies have focused on social responsibility. Second, previous studies have mainly employed the business or organization as the unit of analysis. By concentrating on the decision-making processes of individual

purchasing managers, the study offers a bottom-up perspective on how corporate environmental responsibility can be strengthened. Third, the dominant perspective of ethics in previous studies in business has been the cognitive perspective, ignoring the role of emotions. This study examined both cognitive and affective elements of attitude formation empirically, contributing to the ethical decision-making field of research by providing a better understanding of how emotions influence environmental decisions of purchasing professionals in a company.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study suggests ways in which companies can support ERP by shaping employee behavior and, over time, transforming organizational culture. This transformation in return improves the quality of corporate environmental decisions. The results indicate that the ERP decision process involves a cognitive decision framework of the beliefs-attitudes-behavior sequence in which purchasing professionals carefully assess their moral beliefs to process environmentally responsible decisions. This is while differences exist between individuals in these personal factors. Organizations will need to fine-tune their business strategies to deal with such variation in personal factors and moral beliefs among their employees and integrate this issue into their ethics corporate training programs. This is specifically vital for businesses involved in a multinational environment and business managers in multinational business firms; they must be aware that individuals differ in their thinking in reference to ERP, especially in terms of idealism and relativism. Organizations should also practice and implement ERP to provide better standards to help their employees obtain a clear understanding of what is appropriate. This can be accomplished by modifying the organizational social and ethical environment where top management and employees observe each other.

Most importantly, the model provides empirical evidence that purchasing professionals search outside of themselves for guidance in environmentally responsible decision making. In this regard, peers and top management are effective factors that can influence both attitude and relativism. Thus, explicit examples of standards for employees should be provided in organizations, such as workshops where managers and employees can discuss their beliefs; this may result in reducing the gap between idealism and relativism.

Moreover, programs that can promote interpersonal communication on environmental responsibility issues, such as inter-departmental meetings, internal publications, bulletin boards, discussion sessions, and reward systems, would be effective in this regard as well.

Avenues for Future Research

This research has tried to explain the ERP decision-making process among buying/sourcing professionals and thus has contributed to increase the understanding of the issue. Nevertheless, opportunities still abound for further research within the growing area of sustainability, sustainable purchasing, and supply chain management (Miemczyk et al., 2012; Johnsen et al., 2017). First, since the buying/sourcing professionals' intention for ERP decisions is assessed in this study, measuring the actual ERP performance in future research is worthwhile. Moreover, while this study established that significant relationships exist between the suggested antecedents in the proposed model, it did not establish the underlying reasons behind these relationships. This leads to an opportunity for further research to look deeper into these relationships and a chance to advance the theoretical perspectives in the field. Moreover, to reduce the tendency of social desirability in responses in future research, Park and Stoel (2005) suggested that qualitative approaches could play a role in accessing the underlying motivations indirectly (Park & Stoel, 2005). One particularly interesting future research direction would be to look at significant barriers to environmentally responsible purchasing including competence and implementation related issues relevant to retail settings (Chkanikova, 2016; Schulze & Bals, 2020). Future research can also consider testing the conceptual framework of this study in other countries and other industries to compare findings and examine boundary conditions (Ko et al., 2019; Rasheed et al., 2025).

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