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WHAT PREVENTS CONSUMERS FROM MAKING RESPONSIBLE ONLINE PURCHASES?

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The objective of this qualitative study is to examine and describe what prevents consumers from making responsible online purchases. The data were collected during February and March 2023 with an online survey. The data comprises the respondents' (N=245) free-form written responses, in which they articulated and explained the factors that prevent their responsible online purchases. The findings indicate that external and internal factors can prevent consumers' responsible online purchases. While external factors – online stores – are mainly blamed for promoting irresponsible buying behavior, internal factors – consumers' individual characteristics – are also recognized to have an important role in irresponsible purchasing behavior. The external factors identified in this study include 1) pricing, 2) information, and 3) availability. The internal factors include 1) self-indulgence and 2) trust.

Keywords:

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1 Introduction

Online purchasing has increased significantly during the last decade. This growth can largely be attributed to the increased use of the internet and benefits that e-commerce provides to consumers, such as the ability to search for low prices, access an extensive product range, and the convenience of shopping from home. Online purchasing has also been encouraged by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the restrictions during the pandemic, many consumers discovered novel ways of utilizing online retailers and service providers. This shift in consumer behavior has led to a boom in e-commerce, with many businesses having to rapidly adapt to meet the increased demand for online shopping.

While online purchasing has become increasingly vital and provides various advantages for consumers, it has also led to unfavorable ecological outcomes such as increased waste, carbon emissions, and energy consumption. The ecological implications of e-commerce have been extensively discussed, with adverse effects arising from packaging materials, delivery methods, unsold products, and product returns (Tiwari & Singh, 2011), to name a few. In addition, studies show that the significance of environmental considerations in consumer shopping choices is on the rise (e.g., De Canio et al., 2021). As a result, in recent years, the heightened environmental concerns and competitive pressure have spurred a greater emphasis on sustainability issues by both researchers and practitioners in the e-commerce industry.

However, despite the discussion surrounding the environmental and ethical impacts of online purchasing, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding of the topic. Studies have only partially investigated sustainable e-commerce, focusing on retailer-related issues such as packaging materials, logistic management aimed at reducing carbon emissions, and minimizing adverse environmental effects (Zhang, 2023). There is a particular need for further investigation on the consumer perspectives. Although there is a prevailing trend towards pro-green attitudes, it is common for consumers to opt for non-green alternatives when making purchases (e.g., Park & Lin, 2020; Su et al., 2022). Thus, studies should investigate what hinders responsible shopping and the ways in which retailers can encourage their customers to adopt more responsible behaviors (Wiese et al., 2015).

The objective of this qualitative study is to examine and describe what prevents consumers from making responsible online purchases. By comprehending these factors, it becomes possible to better understand the attitude-behavior gap identified in responsible consumption (e.g., Park & Lin, 2020; Su et al., 2022). The findings can be utilized to pinpoint the specific areas where consumers require assistance in making more responsible purchasing decisions and where online businesses should take measures to encourage sustainable shopping practices.

Next, Section 2 discusses previous studies on responsible online purchasing. Section 3 describes the methods used for data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the results of the study, and Section 5 discusses the contributions of the study, its implications for management, and recommendations for future research.

2 Responsible online purchasing and its obstacles

The topic of responsible purchasing has been explored using various concepts, with sustainability and responsibility being among the prevalent ones. Sustainability and responsibility are interdependent concepts that reinforce and complement each other. Sustainability refers to the ability to maintain or preserve resources for future generations. Sustainability encompasses a range of issues, including environmental protection, social equity, and economic viability. (Armstrong et al., 2019) Responsibility, on the other hand, refers to the obligation or duty to act in a way that is ethical and accountable. It involves being aware of the impact of one's actions on others and the environment and taking steps to minimize harm. Responsible behavior is often necessary to achieve sustainability goals, such as reducing waste, conserving resources, and mitigating environmental impacts. The concept of responsible purchasing is centered around engaging in activities that aim to minimize the impact of purchased goods or services on the environment (Follows & Jobber, 2000), and opting for socially and ethically responsible purchases (Jain et al., 2022).

Previous research has predominantly explored responsible consumption in a general sense, rather than delving into the specifics of purchasing channels (online/offline). The purchase of responsible products is influenced by factors such as engagement in sustainable consumption, the degree of environmental and health consciousness, social influences (Carter et al., 2021), and the reputation of a company's environmental performance (Grimmer & Bingham, 2013). As evidenced by studies,

several obstacles can prevent consumers from making responsible purchasing decisions. It has been shown, for example, that low availability hinders the consumption of sustainable products and social pressure increases purchase intentions (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Responsible consumption is barriered by consumers' materialism, and thus may be facilitated by an increase in consumers' environmental concern (Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008). Sustainable consumption decisions are directly hindered by a lack of opportunity, and indirectly by lack of motivation to consume sustainably (Tong et al., 2023). Choosing to purchase responsible products often involves immediate costs for individuals, such as financial expenses or the effort required to change their behavior (Demarque et al., 2015). Despite holding pro-environmental attitudes, even environmentally conscious consumers often face a trade-off between sustainability and other attributes such as price, quality, and performance. As a result, non-environmentally friendly alternatives are chosen. (Olson, 2013)

In prior research, only a few studies have concentrated on responsible online shopping, with most of these studies examining it only in quite limited product or service contexts, such as fashion retailing (e.g., Kemppainen et al., 2021, 2022). In contrast, considerably more studies have been done on sustainable online shopping. For example, Yang et al. (2018) examined the adoption of sustainable online shopping in the context of the China's Double-11 shopping festival and found sustainable online shopping intention to be positively affected by the attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control related to sustainable online shopping and negatively affected by the atmospheric factors related to the shopping festival itself. In contrast, Song et al. (2020) found the lack of policy support, insufficient knowledge of sustainable consumption, and the lack of awareness of sustainable consumption to act as the main barriers to the adoption of sustainable online shopping, whereas Schumacher et al. (2022) found technostress to act as an additional barrier by weakening the link between the general preference for sustainable products and the actual choice of sustainable products in an online shopping situation. In turn, Kanay et al. (2021) examined the potential of goal setting to promote sustainable online shopping, finding that both the goal setting and the feedback concerning the carbon footprint of a shopping basket together promote more sustainable online consumption. Finally, Demarque et al. (2015), Antonides and Welvaarts (2020), Berger et al. (2020), Gossen et al. (2022), Hollaus and Schantl (2022), and Michels et al. (2022) all examined the potential of different kinds of

nudging techniques (cf. Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Lehner et al., 2016) to promote sustainable online shopping, finding many of them to be highly effective for this purpose.

3 Data collection and analysis

The data for this study were collected during February and March 2023 with an online survey that was conducted by using the LimeSurvey service. The survey respondents were recruited by promoting the survey on social media and via the communication channels of Finnish universities and student associations. To promote the response rate, all the respondents who completed the survey were able to participate in a prize drawing of ten gift boxes worth about 25 € each. The survey questionnaire consisted of three sections, of which the first section concentrated on the general background information of the respondents, the second section on their general online shopping behaviour, and the third section more specifically on their responsible online shopping behaviour. This last section also contained the three open-ended questions concerning responsible online shopping behaviour. Answers to the question n:o 3 “What kind of factors promote you to be or prohibit you from being responsible when making online purchases? Why?” were utilized as the data of this study. Respondents who provided written responses that clearly identified a factor hindering their responsible purchasing were eligible for inclusion in the final analysis.

In total, 245 respondents provided explanations regarding the prohibiting factors. Their average response time for the whole survey was about 20 minutes. The sample statistics in terms of the gender, age, yearly taxable income, socioeconomic status, and average online shopping frequency of the respondents are reported in Table 1. As can be seen, most of the respondents were women, students, and relatively young. Their age varied between 19 and 66 years, with a mean of 27.8 years and a standard deviation of 8.1 years. However, most of the respondents were relatively active online shoppers who shopped online at least monthly on average. All of them also had at least some experience in online shopping.

Table 1: Sample statistics (N = 245)

	N	%		N	%
Gender			Socioeconomic status		
Man	44	18.0	Student	190	77.6
Woman	189	77.1	Employee or self-employed	53	21.6
Other	12	4.9	Unemployed or unable to work	6	2.4
Age			Pensioner	1	0.4
Under 25 years	105	42.9	Other	2	0.8
25–49 years	133	54.3	Online shopping frequency		
50 years or over	7	2.9	At least weekly	10	4.1
Yearly personal taxable income			At least monthly	141	57.6
Under 15,000 €	160	65.3	At least yearly	88	35.9
15,000–29,999 €	33	13.5	Less frequently than yearly	5	2.0
30,000 € or over	39	15.9	Has never shopped online	0	0.0
No response	13	5.3	No response	1	0.4

The data analysis was conducted using NVivo 12 Pro qualitative analysis software. First, factors that represented the challenges of responsible online purchasing were extracted from each respondent and coded based on their content. Second, after identifying the initial codes describing the obstacles, they were grouped and labelled based on the common themes identified within the codes. Consequently, the study identified five primary themes that describe what prevents consumers from making responsible online purchases.

4 Findings

The findings indicate that external and internal factors can prevent consumers' responsible online purchases. While external factors – online stores – are mainly blamed for promoting irresponsible buying behavior, internal factors – consumers' individual characteristics – are also recognized to have an important role in irresponsible purchasing behavior. The external factors identified in this study include 1) pricing, 2) information, and 3) availability. The internal factors include 1) self-indulgence and 2) trust. The following sections will discuss these themes and their corresponding content.

4.1 External online store related factors

Pricing. The primary obstacle to responsible online purchases was the pricing of responsible products (157 references). The respondents perceived responsible products to be costly, or more expensive than their conventional counterparts. Some participants noted that domestic products and brands were particularly expensive compared to their foreign counterparts. The experience of the price difference between responsible and irresponsible products discouraged respondents from choosing the responsible option: the perceived financial sacrifice was often considered too high. The difference in price is noteworthy particularly when the perceived quality of the responsible product does not outweigh the drawbacks of choosing a less responsible alternative. Conversely, if the difference in price is perceived as negligible, the responsible option is chosen.

If the responsible choice is only slightly more expensive than the other options, I'm usually willing to pay for it. – Female, 23

The respondents frequently cited their financial situation as a reason for price-sensitivity, indicating that they are not able to afford responsible alternatives, even if they desire to purchase them. Opting for responsible alternatives was seen as difficult or unfeasible for those facing financial constraints and low incomes. When struggling to make ends meet, prioritizing responsibility over essentials becomes challenging or even impossible, as the following quote demonstrates.

It would be great to buy organic and organically produced/certified products, but at this income level, you choose the cheapest or don't buy at all. – Female, 46

Despite facing obstacles, a number of respondents asserted that they were making their best effort to be responsible, and believed that they would be more inclined to do so if they had more financial means. Purchasing used items, such as those found at online flea markets, was seen as a practical way to make responsible choices. Nevertheless, some respondents also acknowledged that their stinginess contributed negatively to responsible purchasing; they incline to prioritize low prices over responsibility, opting for less sustainable alternatives to save money.

Information. The lack of information regarding responsible practices posed an important hindrance to making responsible online purchases (81 references). Obtaining information on the responsibility of companies or their products was considered a challenging task, with inadequate transparency and quality of available information. According to the respondents, detecting the product's origin is complicated. Online stores do not provide sufficient details about the raw materials used in the products, their origin, the parties and methods involved in the production process, and the manufacturing country. Consequently, it is difficult to determine responsibility; there is no means to verify if unethical practices such as child labor were involved in the production, for example. Despite having good intentions, one may engage in irresponsible purchasing because of lack of information and knowledge.

Reliable information about the entire value chain of the product is not available. [...] The ecological, social and ethical responsibility of the product cannot be traced. – Nonbinary person, 48

Information about the manufacturing process of the products is not easily available, so an unethical product may be bought by mistake.
– Female, 19

There was an expectation for online retailers to offer greater transparency throughout the entire customer journey, encompassing not only the source of the products but also post-purchase events. Specifically, there was a desire for more comprehensive information from these retailers regarding the fate of returned products, including whether they are discarded as waste or resold.

Almost all online stores have very poor transparency, e.g., about what happens if you return something. Do they, for example, go straight to the trash? – Female, 22

Additionally, the topic of used products was raised, with a recognition of their inherent responsibility in recycling, but also acknowledging that information on these items is often even more challenging to obtain than for new products.

Responsibility can be achieved by facilitating the online search for used products, ensuring their appeal to customers, and presenting relevant product information in a manner consistent with that of new items.

– Female, 23

Due to the insufficient information available, the buyer needs to make even more assumptions regarding the responsibility of a product when dealing with used items.

Availability. The availability of responsible products (74 references) was found to be inferior to that of non-sustainable options. In some product categories, it is possible that responsible alternatives may not be available at all, which limits the consumer's ability to make sustainable choices. Furthermore, even when responsible options are available, the selection may be inadequate in terms of product characteristics such as size and design. Foreign online retailers may offer a better selection, but this comes at the cost of longer transportation distances. Therefore, buyers must consider whether their ultimate choice is more responsible, weighing the environmental impact of delivery against their preference for sustainable products.

Narrow selection. For example, I'm looking for a certain product that needs to be ordered from abroad, which potentially increases emissions. – Female, 21

On the other hand, it was noted that buying from foreign stores can also be difficult, because not all stores deliver products to foreign countries, such as Finland.

4.2 Internal customer related factors

Self-indulgence. The respondents also emphasized self-indulgence (52 references) – the role of their own consumer attributes and the desire for convenience in terms of the shopping process and the product that is purchased. A purchasing process that is quick and uncomplicated is preferred, and products are expected to possess certain features that may not be available in responsible alternatives.

There are many online stores that are very irresponsible. So a large selection and an easy shopping experience can be tempting at times.

– Female, 22

One of the reasons for irresponsible choices was the fast-paced nature of daily life. It was observed that addressing sustainability concerns is time-consuming and often impractical, especially when purchases need to be made quickly. Several respondents also admitted to being lazy and neglecting their responsibility due to this. While responsible shopping is acknowledged as an important concept, it often takes a backseat to other pressing concerns in everyday life.

The preventing factors are probably hurry and laziness. – Female, 28

Consequently, many respondents reported having inadequate knowledge about responsibility and emphasized the need to start with the basics. In addition, some respondents revealed that they are impulsive and easily swayed by attractive deals, making shopping a source of pleasure rather than a responsibility issue.

Trust. Issues of trust (48 references) were also highlighted as a barrier to responsible purchases. Numerous respondents expressed skepticism towards the notion of sustainability, suspecting that companies engage in greenwashing when communicating their efforts to be responsible. This is due to a lack of evidence to support their claims, or the provision of insufficient evidence. There was a perception among many respondents that online stores engage in deceptive practices, misleading or cheating consumers. It was believed that online stores are withholding information about products, misleading consumers with inaccurate information, using certificates without authorization, and leveraging claims of responsibility as marketing tools.

The consumer is being cheated. Many products are advertised as green and responsible, and there are many certificates that ultimately do not guarantee anything. – Female, 27

Many respondents expressed difficulties in distinguishing genuine responsibility claims made by companies. To address this problem, responsible and familiar stores were prioritized. By shopping at stores that exclusively offer responsible products or if the store has been previously self-evaluated as responsible, there is no need to evaluate each product individually.

Trust-related factors were found to be relevant also in the context of online C2C (consumer to consumer) trade and flea markets. Even though flea markets inherently promote responsible behavior by facilitating recycling, there may be apprehension and unease associated with making purchases. When consumers engage in transactions with each other, the absence of easily accessible aid can create challenging situations. Moreover, assessing the quality of second-hand products, particularly when shopping online, can pose a challenge because the product cannot be physically experienced before the purchase.

5 Discussion

This study's findings enhance comprehension of the factors that contribute to the discrepancy between attitudes and actions (e.g., Park & Lin, 2020; Su et al., 2022) regarding responsible online purchasing. The study demonstrates that external factors related to online store and internal factors related to consumers themselves can prevent responsible online purchases. According to this study, consumers tend to attribute their irresponsible spending mostly to online stores: pricing of responsible products, information about responsibility issues and availability of responsible products. In addition, consumers recognize their own responsibility and the influence of personal factors on practicing responsible behavior while shopping online.

As previous research has indicated (e.g., Demarque et al., 2015), opting for responsible choices often entails trade-offs and various costs for consumers. According to this study, consumers tend to perceive such trade-offs and costs particularly in terms of **price**. The study highlighted that pricing and perceptions related to pricing are the primary factors that hinder responsible online shopping. Consumers tend to view responsible products as costly or more expensive than other products, which limits their willingness to purchase them. Previous research has also emphasized the crucial role of price in responsible consumption (e.g., Kemppainen et al., 2021). Given that pricing is (still) a significant obstacle to responsible behavior, further investigation is necessary to understand why consumers perceive responsible products as expensive and what can be done to the negative price perceptions. Future studies should delve deeper into the (lower) pricing of responsible products and explore ways to enhance consumers' price perception and motivation to purchase responsible options.

In line with previous studies (e.g., Song et al., 2020; Kemppainen et al., 2021), the findings underscore the significance of the responsibility information provided by online stores. Online retailers do not provide comprehensive information about the social and environmental impacts of their products. Lack of transparency and information about products' sourcing, production processes and their impact makes responsible shopping challenging. The responsibility information – and the inadequacy of it – is also linked to another obstacle identified in this study: consumers' trust. According to the findings, consumers exhibit a degree of skepticism and suspect that companies engage in greenwashing. Such perceptions hinder responsible buying and may negatively impact online stores and other companies that genuinely prioritize responsibility themes. Future research should examine how issues related to responsibility could be communicated more effectively to buyers. Clarifying the communication of responsible practices could enhance consumers' understanding of responsible products and promote their purchasing behavior. Another critical aspect to explore is how to build consumer trust in the information provided. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the ethical and environmental implications of their purchases and are seeking more information to make informed choices. By understanding these issues, online services can be developed to promote responsible consumption and better cater to consumers' needs in this regard. Previous studies have noted that practices such as feedback concerning the carbon footprint of a shopping basket (Kanay et al. 2021) can promote responsible online purchasing. Hence, future studies should delve deeper into other solutions and online store characteristics that could help solving the well-identified information gap.

The findings also indicate that the availability of responsible products is an obvious challenge to shop responsibly. Consistent with these results, prior research has demonstrated that sustainable consumption choices are impeded by limited opportunities (Tong et al., 2023) and inadequate availability (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). As responsible product availability has been recognized as a challenge for quite some time, it prompts a question of why it continues to present a major hurdle. It is worth exploring the reasons behind the perceived inadequacy of the supply and identifying strategies to make responsible alternatives more accessible to consumers.

Finally, the study underscored the influence of consumer attributes and convenience-seeking behavior – self-indulgence – on responsible online purchases. Amidst the business of daily life, responsible products or the associated purchasing procedures may not seem appealing enough. The act of responsible online purchasing is often viewed as unpleasant, excessively challenging and requiring significant amounts of time – the tradeoff is perceived as excessively large (Olson, 2013). Hence, sustainable consumption decisions are hindered by lack of motivation to consume sustainably (Tong et al., 2023). Future research should delve deeper into ways to impact the convenience of responsible shopping, such as exploring how online store design and characteristics can be utilized to enhance the ease of responsible shopping.

To summarize, this study identified factors that prevent responsible online purchasing based on survey responses. The identified obstacles are largely in line with previous research related to responsible consumption in different (online/offline) contexts. It is therefore worth asking, why these obstacles have persisted in a similar fashion, year after year. The obstacles of responsible online shopping should be investigated more comprehensively and through various methodologies to gain a deeper understanding and solutions regarding these issues.

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