

The Influence of Ethical Consumption Factors on Purchase Intention of Poverty Alleviation Agricultural Products in China-A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Reducing the imbalance between urban and rural development and improving farmers' living standards and welfare are central objectives of China's rural revitalization strategy. Poverty alleviation through consumption plays a pivotal role in these objectives. In the context of China, poverty alleviation agricultural product (PAAP) is an ethical product which is marketed to assist the impoverished farmers. However, the sales of PAAP fall short of expectation. In this paper, the authors introduce the concept of PAAP, along with its sales status and its relationship with ethical consumption. Then a systematic literature review on the purchase intention of PAAP is conducted. Furthermore, the authors delve into a discussion on two practical issues surrounding the ethical consumption of PAAP. Finally, the paper proposes a conceptual framework with four propositions.

Keywords: Ethical Consumption, Poverty Alleviation Agricultural Products (PAAP), Rural Economic Revitalization, Ethical Consumption Factor

Introduction

China has entered a transitional period of consolidating the achievements made in the battle against poverty and achieving comprehensive rural revitalization after 2021. During the change process, the phenomenon of unbalanced domestic development remains prominent, and the problem of regional poverty will continue for a long time in China. It was believed that more efforts should be placed on increasing the income of farmers in relatively poor areas, narrowing the development gap between the low-income population and other groups, and rectifying the imbalanced regional development situation (Wang, 2022). The consumption of poverty alleviation agricultural products (PAAP) holds significant importance in increasing rural farmers' income and fostering the development of relatively impoverished regions. However, the market share of PAAP remains small, although the data indicates a

substantial rise in its sales. There are reasons to be wary of the factors governing PAAP consumption and the situation as it currently stands.

PAAP is a typical ethical product, and its consumption can increase poor farmers' income directly and promote the development of relatively impoverished regions indirectly. Ethical attribute differentiates PAAPs from non-PAAPs (Zhang et al., 2023). It is believed that consumers' ethical considerations in enhancing the well-being of farmers play a pivotal role in the PAAP purchase decision process (Liu, 2017). However, most current studies have been conducted from a traditional consumption perspective of what factors impact PAAP purchase intentions. There exists a gap in the current literature regarding the ethical consumption factors that impact the purchase intention of PAAP, with a dearth of frameworks specifically examining ethical factors and their relationship with purchase intention.

The researchers conducted a literature review on the purchase intention of PAAP and highlighted the real-world issues of ethical consumption of PAAP. Following these analyses, the researchers proposed four hypotheses and developed a conceptual framework. The novelty of this paper lies in the fact that it highlights the importance of the ethical consumption factors in purchase behavior of PAAP, which have been theoretically proposed in the past but seldom been explored, not to mention being considered together in one framework. It is hoped that it will spark more research relevant to this topic. In addition, the findings of this research may thus be insightful for farmers, retailers, policymakers, and academicians to understand ethical consumption to some extent better.

Background of the Study

In 2014, the State Council leading group office of poverty alleviation and development of China announced 832 national-level poverty-stricken counties, all of which had successfully eradicated absolute poverty in 2021, but still have considerable differences in economic growth compared with other parts of China. The per capita net income of poverty-stricken regions has surpassed China's poverty level (RMB 1,067 in 2008, RMB 2,300 in 2011, and RMB 4,000 in 2020), thereby resolving fundamental survival issues. Nonetheless, the majority of counties that have removed absolute poverty are still afflicted in multiple dimensions; their hematopoietic capacity is weak, and they continue to face obstacles and bottlenecks in the subsequent development. They are regarded as relatively poor areas with a higher probability of falling back into poverty. Poverty-stricken counties are usually located in remote rural areas, and the geographical remoteness, inadequate infrastructures, and deficient public services significantly impact these economically disadvantaged regions. These regions rely heavily on agricultural products grown in the field, and promoting the marketing of agricultural products is tenable for raising the incomes of the population in these areas (Zhang et al., 2023).

The Definition of Poverty Alleviation Agricultural Products

The State Council leading group office of poverty alleviation and development of China defines poverty alleviation products as those produced in poor areas of the central and western regions that have the effect of alleviating poverty and benefiting the impoverished farmers. This study employs the term "PAAP" (Poverty Alleviation Agricultural Products) to refer to agricultural products originating from regions the National Rural Development Bureau acknowledges as impoverished areas and possessing poverty alleviation effects. The primary objective of promoting PAAP is to ensure the development of agricultural industries

in poverty-stricken regions, thereby enabling impoverished individuals to increase their incomes and escape the cycle of poverty.

Sales Status of PAAP

The data indicates a substantial rise in sales. Nevertheless, the market share of PAAP remains relatively small. In 2020, China had 2844 county-level districts (as per the China Statistical Yearbook 2021), with 832 national-level poverty-stricken counties accounting for 29.25% of this total. E-commerce has emerged as the primary sales channel for PAAP, especially after the covid-19 pandemic (Hu & Wang, 2022). However, based on data published by the National Bureau of Statistics and China's official media outlet, Guangming.com, China's online retail sales of agricultural products in 2020 amounted to 575 billion CNY. Out of this total, the online retail sales from 832 national-level impoverished counties reached 40.66 billion CNY, accounting for a mere 7.1% of the overall sales. In another study, Li et al. (2022) calculated that for every 100 CNY spent on household consumption in China, less than 1 CNY is allocated to poverty-alleviation products.

Ethical Consumption and PAAP

Shaw and Clarke (1998) defined ethical consumption as an extent to which consumers prioritize their ethical considerations when making product choices. In this study, ethical consumption is defined as making a purchase while considering the ethical attributes of the product (here, i.e., PAAP). Consumers may consider one or more ethical attributes when buying products (De Pelsmacker et al., 2005). Ethical consumption can be as simple as purchasing fair trade coffee (Robichaud & Yu, 2021) and green cosmetics and personal care products (Suphasomboon & Vassanadumrongdee, 2022), or as complex as consumption covering a variety of ethical issues, including environmental protection, regulation, politics, and society (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

PAAP is regarded as ethical because of its ethical attributes. When customers consider the ethical attribute of PAAP before making a purchase, it is an ethical consumption behavior that follows the notion of ethical consumption. Several studies have shown that the ethical attribute of PAAP plays an essential role in the customer purchase process. For example, according to Li et al. (2022), customers driven by poverty-alleviation functional attribute will likely to become the dominant purchasing force. In Hwang (2016)'s study, it was shown that a certain number of customers hold favorable views about PAAP due to its impact on improving the lives of the underprivileged; their positive perceptions of PAAP could result in an increased demand for this ethical product.

Literature Review

The researchers conducted a systematic literature review on studies of purchase intention of PAAP. The results of this literature review provide valuable insights for researchers to understand the current research landscape within the realm of PAAP consumption, and most importantly, identify ethical factors that may influence purchase intention. The literature review was conducted in June 2023. The researchers used Scopus and Web of Science (WOS) databases because of their comprehensive coverage of business journals, timely updating, and frequent use in recent systematic literature reviews (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016; Le et al., 2022). This study used the search criteria and ultimately incorporated the Boolean operators as follows: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (purchas* AND "poverty alleviation" AND product) OR TITLE-ABS-

KEY (consumption AND "poverty alleviation" AND product)). This search string is relatively broad because the researchers want to search for as many articles related to PAAP as possible and then select the important ones. The researcher excluded book or book chapters, editorial, conference paper, short survey, note and erratum, and any articles that are not written in English or Chinese. Given the limited number of articles obtained in the first round, the researchers did not set any further screening criteria.

As shown in Figure 1, the initial sample using the search string hits 157 articles from the Scopus and WOS databases. Subsequently, 40 duplicated studies were removed, leaving 117 unique studies from both databases. Following a thorough screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords, studies that did not explicitly discuss the customer purchase behavior of PAAP were excluded. Based on the screening, although the keywords were present, most studies were unrelated to the purchase behavior. Many of these articles focus on topics such as assessing specific products that have the potential to guarantee or improve the quality of life for individuals residing in impoverished regions (Li & Xu, 2022; Shrestha et al., 2019), strategies for commercializing indigenous crops or managing related businesses (Donkor et al., 2023; Ochieng & Cho, 2023), and the evaluation of various policies or strategies aimed at poverty reduction (Abduvaliev & Bustillo, 2020; Cademartori, 2003; Tsaurai, 2018). Consequently, 110 articles were excluded.

Of the seven remaining articles, four studies were deemed less relevant to purchase intention. These studies pertained to consumers' subsequent product preference after purchasing poverty alleviation products (Chen et al., 2023) and their willingness to pay a higher price (Jiang et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). After screening and reviewing, only three articles are related to the purchase intention of PAAP. The specifics of these three articles are outlined in Table 1. It should be noted that the two studies that analysed poverty alleviation products (PAP) instead of PAAP (i.e., Wang et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2021) were retained, owing to the significant presence of PAAP products within PAP. Consequently, their findings are pertinent to this publication.

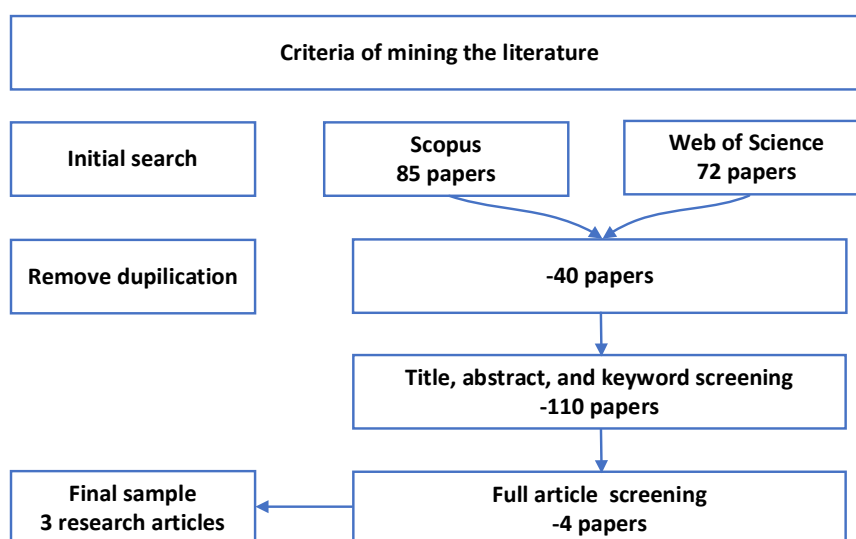


Figure 1. The Flow Chart of the Data Collection Process

Table 1

A Literature Analysis on Purchase Intention of PAAP

Study	Independent variables	Findings
Zhou et al. (2021)	Facial expressions of advertising models, message framing (gain-framed/loss-framed), guilty	The interaction of model's facial expressions and PAAP advertisement message framing impacts consumer guilt and purchase intention. Notably, a loss-framed message with a negative facial expression fails to raise purchase intention.
Li et al. (2022)	User feedback mechanism, platform supervision mechanism, product traceability mechanism, product certification mechanism, ethical trust	Effective user feedback, platform supervision, product traceability, and certification mechanisms enhance customer trust, leading to increased purchase intention of PAP.
Wang et al. (2023)	Distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice, emotional attitude	All three dimensions of perceived justice significantly and positively affect the purchase intention of e-commerce PAP.

It can be found that among these three studies, only the study of Li et al. (2022) incorporated an ethical consumption factor (i.e., ethical trust). Other studies have predominantly employed traditional consumption factors as the antecedents of purchase intention, although all acknowledging the product's poverty alleviation properties. After the literature review, the researchers have identified only one ethical consumption factor, which is not yet able to construct a conceptual framework effectively. Accordingly, the following section identifies additional possible ethical variables by examining the practical challenges associated with the ethical consumption of PAAP.

Practical Challenges

Insufficient Identifiability of Information

China's PAAPs are sold mainly via three specific channels: special areas on mainstream e-commerce platforms, exclusive platforms, and special counters (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2020). However, well-known exclusive platforms for individual users have not yet emerged in China, special counters remain unpopularized in cities. Furthermore, the special areas on mainstream e-commerce platforms, which are readily available to consumers, suffer from a lack of poverty alleviation information.

In August 2023, the researchers conducted a survey on special areas on JD.com and Pinduoduo – two leading e-commerce platforms in China. When examining the first 20 agricultural items displayed by searching 'poverty alleviation' or 'agricultural aid', it was found that only half of the products labelled their title with their poverty alleviation attributes. What is worse is that all the detailed descriptions of these products on the details page focus primarily on the natural characteristics of the product's origin, quality, and history, they don't mention anything about the products' poverty alleviation attribute, like PAAP marks and their poverty background. Consumers generally don't pay much attention to store names and product titles when shopping, but the lack of information on the detail page makes it difficult for consumers to determine whether these products belong to PAAP.

The same problem exists with PAAP sold on non-specific channels. The researcher randomly selected ten relatively poor counties and used their names as search terms on the two large e-commerce sites, Taobao and Pinduoduo. Then, ten products were chosen at random from

the search results page of each area, and their detail pages were reviewed. Of the 100 products examined, only 8.9% of the products' titles or descriptions contained ethically relevant information. In the interest of prudence, we also examined several randomly selected agricultural products from relatively poor areas sold on Tik Tok, the most prominent short video platform in China. Our investigation revealed a notable absence of ethical information once more.

With the rapid development of Internet technology in modern society, consumers face and process a vast amount of information daily, making it challenging for them to identify ethical products and comprehend the ethical significance of purchasing them (Yamoah et al., 2016). Information about the product and its ethical attributes plays a significant role in consumers' purchase decisions (Eldesouky et al., 2020). It is possible for consumers to consider the ethical impacts of their agricultural products choices if they are provided with sufficient information. In contrast, if the ethical attributes of agricultural products are not easily recognizable, then their ethical value cannot significantly influence consumers' behavior (Zhu et al., 2022).

Inadequate Consumer Poverty Alleviation Responsibility

Reflecting on China's history of poverty alleviation, the Chinese government has always placed a high priority on the economic development of relatively poor areas, playing a key role in top-level design, strategic planning, policy support, infrastructure construction, publicity and orientation, and injecting a strong force into the economic growth of these impoverished areas (Zhu et al., 2022). In addition, enterprises, social organizations, and other relevant entities are actively involved in the country's poverty alleviation strategy. They are involved to varying degrees in agricultural planting production, promotion, logistics, distribution, and after-sales service. In light of this background, a large number of agricultural products have been produced in impoverished areas.

However, the present issue lies in the fact that sales to individual customers are low. According to the 47th Statistical Report on Internet Development of China published by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), out of the total number of internet users claiming to be aware of online poverty alleviation activities, merely 39.7% indicate that they had purchased PAAP to support poverty alleviation efforts. In a survey conducted in 2020, Quan (2021) discovered that only 11.82% of individual consumers actively purchased PAAP. Official statistics show that the main impetus for alleviate poverty through consumption comes from centralized purchasing by government agencies, state-owned enterprises, and institutions (Office of the State Council, 2019). Based on above discussion, it is evident that customers did not actively participate in efforts to reduce poverty in remote areas, suggesting a lack of customer involvement towards impoverished people's wellbeing.

Customer responsibility is an essential antecedent of purchase decisions (Hamzah & Tanwir, 2021). When consumers are ethically responsible, they will see purchasing ethical products as a socially responsible action that cannot be shirked. Consequently, they will take self-imposed action, such as opting for ethical products (Yu et al., 2017). However, if consumers do not possess ethical responsibility, they are less influenced by the product's ethical attributes (here, poverty alleviation), and thus less likely to spend time and money on ethical behaviors.

Hypothesis and A Proposed Conceptual framework

The researchers have drawn one ethical consumption factor (i.e., poverty alleviation trust) through systematic literature review on poverty alleviation consumption. Another two factors (i.e. poverty alleviation information and poverty alleviation responsibility) were identified through practical investigation of real-world issues and secondary data respectively, addressing specific challenges faced by practitioners. The researchers combined these three variables with Rest's (1986) Four-Component Model (FCM) to create a conceptual framework designed to examine the effects of ethical consumption factors on intention to purchase PAAP. The FCM model identifies the four psychological steps for individual ethical decision making, namely recognizing moral issues, making a judgement on the issue, establishing ethical intention, and finally taking action (Rest, 1986). The model can be seen in Figure 2. According to Savur et al. (2018), the basis of a variety of ethical decision-making models is consistent with these four steps, such as Hunt and Vitell's (2006) general theory of marketing ethics. In this study, the three variables identified in the previous sections and their relationship with purchase intention can also be explained using the model.



Figure 2. Rest's (1986) Four-Component Model

According to the FCM model, once consumers form their judgment on an issue (i.e., attitude towards buying PAAP), they develop an ethical intention to do so (i.e., intention to buy PAAP). Therefore, this paper incorporates attitude as a key influencing factor of purchase intention of PAAP. Consumer's purchase intentions are significantly influenced by their attitude (UT-THA et al., 2021), which refers to the extent to which an individual holds a positive or negative evaluation or appraisal of the behavior under consideration (Ajzen & Madden, 1986). If an individual holds a favorable attitude toward purchasing PAAP, it indicates that they deem buying that product valuable, wise, and delightful. The more favorable the attitude towards purchasing PAAP, the stronger the consumers' purchase intention.

Several studies have shown that consumer attitude plays an important role in predicting consumers' intention to purchase ethical products. For example, the study of Paul et al. (2016) showed that attitude has a significant positive influence on the consumer's intention to purchase green products. This is in accordance with the findings of Yamoah et al. (2016) and Hamzah and Tanwir (2021), who discovered that consumer's favorable attitude predicts their purchase intention towards fairtrade products and hybrid automobiles respectively. Hence, the first hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Attitude positively affects the purchase intention of PAAP.

Rest (1986) indicated that ethical decision process starts with identifying an ethical issue. To achieve this way, they require related ethical information. Academics have used a range of terms to demonstrate information. For example, in their literature analysis, Hartmann et al. (2021) found that several studies use the term "labelling" or "packaging" to examine the impact of food waste information on the purchase intention of suboptimal Food. Dou and Li (2024) employs "information richness" to denote the degree of product information that is

supplied. Carlson et al. (1993) defines environmental claims as information given to customers regarding a product that relates to its ecological impact, environmental sustainability, or compatibility with nature. In this study, poverty alleviation information refers to the extent to which information is given to customers about a product's poverty alleviation attribute.

Information significantly influences customer purchase decisions (Kim & Lennon, 2008). This is also true in the context of PAAP. Providing poverty alleviation information can help customers recognize the ethical attributes of a product, thus directly influencing their purchasing intention. Moreover, it can also indirectly influence purchase intention by allowing customers to recognize the social contribution of the product and thus develop a positive attitude. This positive evaluation further enhances their intention to buy.

While not proven in a PAAP context, several studies have shown that information is important in predicting consumers' intention to purchase ethical products. For example, Chekima et al. (2016) argued that the provision of information increases consumers' familiarity and positive perception of green products over conventional products. Labelling has been very successful in Malaysia as a strategic tool to attract buyers in the market. Similarly, the findings of Dhir et al. (2021) also emphasized the importance of labelling on intention to buy green apparel. In addition to these direct effects, the findings of Herman et al. (2021) suggest that eco-label information has a positive and significant effect on purchase intention of green products, both directly and indirectly through attitudes. Chang et al. (2019) proved the significant effect of environmental advertising claims and eco-labels on attitudes and purchase intentions.

Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 2: Poverty alleviation information positively affects the purchase intention of PAAP.

Hypothesis 3: Poverty alleviation information positively affects the purchase intention of PAAP through the mediation of attitude.

When consumers engage in ethical decision-making, even if consumers hold a positive judgement of buying PAAP, their intention to purchase may still be impacted if they do not trust the authenticity of the product as an PAAP, or if they do not feel responsible for engaging in the behavior. Therefore, the researchers included poverty alleviation trust and poverty alleviation responsibility as factors influencing purchase intention in the framework.

Trust refers to the firm belief held by an individual or group in the reliability or the word, promise, or written statement of another individual or group (Rotter, 1971). In recent years, some scholars have also defined ethical trust, such as Dong et al. (2022) defines green trust in the context of live e-commerce as the optimistic and positive expectations of live streaming viewers about the ability of platforms and sellers to provide products and services that are environmentally reliable. As far as the researcher knows, there is currently no definition for poverty alleviation trust. Eventually, referring to Chen's (2010) definition of green trust, the researcher defines poverty alleviation trust as to what extent a customer willing to depend on PAAP, on the belief or expectation arising from its demonstrated credibility, benevolence, and capability in poverty alleviation.

Consumers involved in ethical consumption want to buy products with ethical attributes. However, customers' trust in PAAP was severely damaged after negative news reports of "Misleading promotion" and "posturing" (Li et al., 2022). Considering consumers who fear being cheated when buying products with ethical claims is a significant barrier that affects their purchase intention (Chiciudean et al., 2019). It is expected that trust in the poverty alleviation attributes of PAAP would reduce uncertainty in the transaction process, hence impacting an individual's willingness to engage in ethical consumption.

Trust has been identified as a critical antecedent for the purchase intention of ethical products. Research in the ethical consumption domain has shown that trust positively influences consumers' intention to purchase ethical products. Nekmahmud et al. (2022) found that green advertising and quality products and services can boost European tourists' trust, which in turn generates higher purchase intention towards green products and services while travelling. Roh et al. (2022)'s study also showed that the intention to buy organic food is positively related to customers' trust in ethical attributes. In a study employing the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Framework, Ahmad and Zhang (2020) found that if users have a strong belief in companies claiming the eco-friendliness of products, they will rate green products higher and show a strong purchase intention toward those products. The findings of this research on ethical products lead to the fourth hypothesis of this study.

Hypothesis 4: Poverty alleviation trust positively affects the purchase intention of PAAP.

Refer to Hamzah and Tanwir's (2021) definition of environmental responsibility, which is the level of one's behavioral responsibility towards the well-being of the environment. In this study, poverty alleviation responsibility refers to the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as responsible for the well-being of impoverished farmers. An individual with ethical responsibility experiences an anticipated emotion (e.g., guilt) when confronting an ethical dilemma (Steenhaut & Van Kenhove, 2006). The purchase of ethical products might be seen as an ego-centric motivation to relieve one's distress or arouse positive emotions (Barbarossa & De Pelsmacker, 2016). From another perspective, Yu et al. (2017) posited that individuals' ethical responsibility correlates with their degree of concern for a certain issue; consumers exhibit greater enthusiasm in their purchases when they believe their purchasing behavior benefits to the issue. Regarding the purchase intention of PAAP, consumers' poverty alleviation responsibility plays a significant role in influencing their behavior toward ethical consumption. The tendency to purchase is expected to increase when the consumers have higher responsibility towards alleviating poverty.

In the context of ethical consumption, ethical responsibility is an important driver. Studies have shown robust evidence supporting the impact of ethical responsibility on purchase intention. It was found that ethical responsibility has a significant positive impact on purchase intention of green products (Ahmad & Zhang, 2020). The study conducted by He et al. (2021) used grounded theory to do a qualitative analysis. Their results revealed that responsibility, as a behavior motivation, is a significant factor of purchase intention of new energy vehicles. Furthermore, continuing within the domain of new energy vehicles, Hamzah and Tanwir (2021) found that environmental responsibility has a substantial impact on green purchase intention. Consequently, the researcher proposed the fifth hypothesis based on the conclusions of these articles.

Hypothesis 5: Poverty alleviation responsibility positively affects the purchase intention of PAAP.

Using the FCM model as the underlying theory, the researchers incorporated three variables identified from the literature review and the analysis of the real-world issues related to poverty alleviation consumption into the conceptual framework. In addition, the researchers introduced a variable of attitude based on the FCM model. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 3.

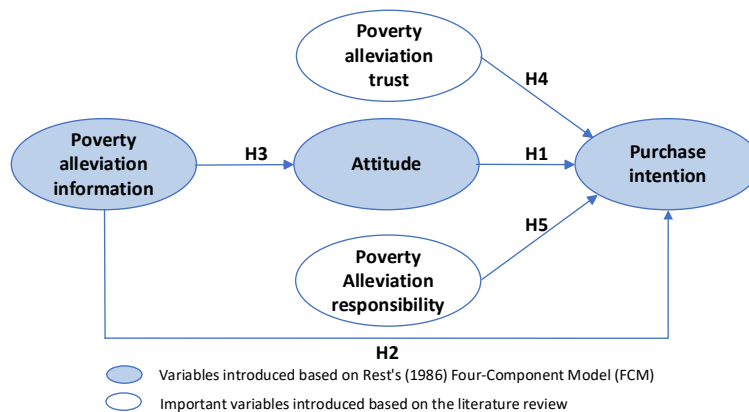


Figure 3. The Proposed Conceptual Framework

Conclusion

In the current era, the significance of ethical attributes of products has increased, reflecting changing societal expectations of marketers and posing challenges to basic marketing assumptions (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). PAAP is a product that fits very well in this context. Nevertheless, its sales performance in reality is not satisfactory. Current scholars have examined the factors that impact purchase intention of this product from various perspectives, ranging from facial expressions of models in livestream broadcasting to perceived justice of transaction. However, there is a lack of research incorporating ethical variables affecting the consumption of PAAP.

This paper presents a framework that aims to explore important ethical consumption factors that impact the purchase intention of PAAP. It suggests that clearly disclosed poverty alleviation attributes of the product, customers' positive attitudes toward purchasing PAAP, their high trust in this attribute, and a strong poverty alleviation responsibility will increase customers' intention to buy PAAP. By understanding these factors and their relationship with purchase intention, this study provides useful insights for marketers and policy makers to better promote PAAP and support poverty alleviation efforts. Being among the first study that focuses on ethical factors that impact purchase intention of PAAP, this study attempts to contribute to the field of ethical consumption. In the future, we hope to further validate and improve this model to promote in-depth understanding on the topic.

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