

Three Routes For Sustainable Consumer Behaviours

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Introduction and Research Aim

As societies become aware of environmental issues, a large portion of consumers are adopting more sustainable lifestyles and refraining from buying certain products (EIB, 2021), with environmental motives predicted to be the top choice criteria for as much as 55% of consumers in the next five years (betterRetailing.com, 2021). An area of particular dispute in literature is between adopting self-oriented (e.g., *related with improving our social/self-identity*) or altruistic (e.g., *environmental-related*) motives for explaining sustainable consumer behaviors (SCBs). In particular, social norms (SN) and environmental concerns (EC) are the two most frequently assessed predictors of SCBs according to our exploratory literature review, yet with contradictory findings.

The aim of this study is *to examine whether consumers, confronted with choosing between environmentally sustainable and non-sustainable products, show higher consideration for social self-enhancement, or environmental motives, and observe to what extent does that influence differs across green categories*. We address the following research questions:

RQ1: Which green product categories are spontaneously mentioned by consumers?

RQ2: To what extent did social and/or environmental factors influenced their choices?

RQ3: What other motivations and barriers may affect SCBs?

Background

The main theoretical perspectives of sustainable consumer behaviors (SCB) from literature employ three major terms interchangeably. *Firstly*, the concept of *environmentally significant behaviors* - coined by P. Stern in the 1990's - was defined by the impact of one's actions, but later, as environmental protection gained relevance, became focused on the purpose instead (Stern, 2000), acknowledging the multidimensionality of SCB. *Secondly*, the *sustainable consumption* concept gained relevance in the academic debate, more dedicated to organizational topics, such as corporate social responsibility, and the Triple Bottom-Line approach (Norman and MacDonald, 2004; Robert, 2000). With the rise of environmental psychology (Vlek, 2000), a more consumer-oriented perspective of sustainability became noticeable, linked into consumer ethics (Chowdhury, 2017), which emphasizes the decrease of negative impacts across the products' lifecycle (White et al., 2019). *Thirdly*, *pro-environmental behaviors* caught the attention of the research community, grounded on the definition of environmental impacts, e.g., *actions that contribute to sustainable use of natural resources* (Peattie, 2004), and the environmental consciousness driving consumer actions (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). Fundamentally, three common elements are captured in these concepts: (i) intention to alter the environmental dynamics; (ii) seeking to minimize negative environmental impacts; (iii) contribute towards the sustainable use of resources (Dong et al., 2020; Hosta and Zabkar, 2021; López-Mosquera et al., 2015; Paswan et al., 2017). Prevalent theories are Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), Stern's Value-Beliefs-Norms (VBN), and Schwartz's Norm Activation Model (NAM), with the debate between those which argue that self-interested acts (e.g., TPB) - such as buying decisions - are guided by a *rational evaluation of outcomes*, depending jointly on ability and intention, which acts as immediate antecedents of behavior (Ahmad et al., 2020; Ajzen, 1991; Yadav et al., 2019), and others (e.g., VBN, NAM) assuming that green buying falls into the pro-social field (Choi et al., 2015; Han et al., 2015; Schwartz, 1977; Stern, 2000), triggered by a *moral sense of obligation to act*, determined by problem awareness, ascription of responsibility, and personal values. While retrieving and assessing 153 empirical studies, we found evidence of 37 variables successfully tested as determinants of SCBs, in four or more occasions¹. SN and EC are the most popular constructs among authors.

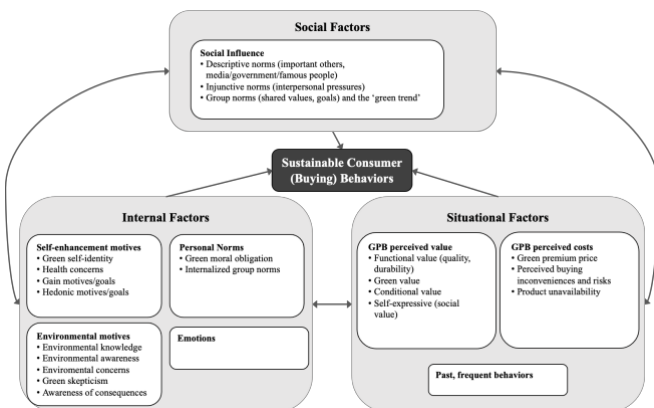
¹ Synthesis to be shared in ANZMAC'22.

Methodology

In order to extend the understanding on SCBs, and challenge (or confirm) findings from literature, we employed a qualitative design, revealing a richer vein of contextualized data about the interacting puzzle of consumer motivations (Davies and Gutsche, 2016; Gruber and Schlegelmilch, 2014; Johnstone and Hooper, 2016). Four focus group sessions were conducted and videotaped with participants' explicit consent, giving the moderator flexibility to guide conversations, and allowing for ideas to be sorted as discussion progresses (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001), which is required to untap the role of SN and EC by addressing episodes from participants' own personal experience. In particular, the small and fairly homogeneous group compositions allowed meaningful and more relaxed peer-to-peer interactions, beyond that of independent contributions, while still allowing for individual contributions to be explored, as suggested by (Tynan and Drayton, 1988). The critical incident technique is a systematic procedure for obtaining qualitative information about significant incidents from observers with first-hand experience (Flanagan, 1954), and was applied in a semi-structured protocol. The recruited participants are, at least, moderately aware of environmental issues. They were asked to recall episodes of when they considered a more sustainable choice. The participants are originated from diverse nationalities, including European, American, and Asian origins, with age and gender balance.

Results and Contributions

Four product categories spontaneously emerged from the discussions: electric cars, green foods, sustainable fashion, and reusable packaging/plastic items. The impact of both EC and social influences were observed, but with regards to SN, a more varied set of sources and effects were identified beyond the scope of TPB, such as self-defining relationships and group membership. Green moral obligations are internalized at a personal level, either before (driven by environmental concerns) or during social processes. Furthermore, anticipated and moral emotions are also experienced, regarding the achievement (or not) of goals related with SCB outcomes, although with manifestation of greenwashing concerns and skepticism. The green premium price is often present as a barrier. Based on first and second-order themes, the aggregated dimensions were categorized and integrated in our new conceptual framework.



Implications for Theory and Practice

By uncovering the multiple intervening factors, this study will assist practitioners and academics to move forward on understanding how to motivate SCBs. A set of open questions for the future will be presented. Evidence points towards the activation of personal norms through two different routes: social/self-enhancement ("the green trend") and environmental attitudes. The third route to SCBs is concerned with the utilitarian/hedonic evaluation of the product (e.g., not guided by neither environmental or social motives). Possible moderator effects were also uncovered which also warrant future empirical investigations.

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