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Young adults' environmental attitudes and purchase intention in Vietnam

Abstract

Vietnam is one of the fastest growing economies in South East Asia with a rapidly growing (but relatively young) middle class. With the rise in the middle class has come a commensurate rise in household consumption. This paper presents the findings of a survey into attitudes towards the environment and the pro-environmental behaviours of young people in Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) Vietnam. The results suggest that environmental considerations are not taken into account in young Vietnamese adults' purchase intentions. This is more evident in expressive purchases, but also to some degree in utilitarian purchases.

Introduction

Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh City are the two most populous cities in Vietnam and are facing environmental problems typical to that of most major cities in developing countries in Southeast Asia, including airborne pollution, water contamination and treatment, and problems associated with hard waste management, recycling and disposal. In addition to infrastructure and developmental pressures is the pressure of a rapidly growing middle class (General Statistics Office, 2009). Middle classes are often characterized by their consumption patterns (de Mooij & Hofstede, 2002; Hanser, 2010). They aspire to the products and services that endow them with social status, prestige and an appearance of 'taste' (Hughes & Woldekidan, 1994; Singh, 2005). As such, expressive purchases are paramount (Holt, 2004; Ogden, Ogden, & Schau, 2004). Kim (2011) found that this need for self-expression in purchasing could be taken to extremes in the Korean cultural context, with some young people financially ruining themselves in the search for the status that comes with conspicuous consumption. Kim (2011, p. iv) linked this to Asian cultural values such as collectivism and love of authenticity, combined with an 'indiscreet' adoption of Western consumption values. The widespread adoption of Western consumerism is a serious concern throughout Asia, including Vietnam, primarily because of the potential impact on the environment (Bardhan, 2006; Sheth, 2011; Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011).

In a Vietnamese context, the actions that an individual can take to protect the environment are not well-defined or described. Evidence elsewhere suggests that a higher level of concern for the environment will lead to greater degrees of effort with regards to conservation (Roberts & Bacon, 1997). However, Schroeder (2011) identifies a belief held by many consumers that science and technology can resolve what individuals cannot. As a consequence, individual responsibility may be more diffused in domains with lower levels of understanding of the capabilities of technology at the grass roots level, such as that which exists in some areas of Vietnam. Whether consumers in Vietnam personally take action in relation to pro-environmental consumption decisions has so far not been investigated.

In addition to individual motivations and actions, is the broader social context of such behaviours. Behavioural aspects of consumption are culturally bound. Most marketing theories rely on what can be referred to as a Western perspective of the individual as an independent, autonomous identity, free to make decision based on purely personal desire and affiliations (Roll, 2006). This approach to human behaviour and behavioural intent is reflected in many well-established Western theories used in marketing. For example, Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs is to be found in most basic marketing and consumer behaviour textbooks. An alternative to Maslow's theory was proposed by Schütte and Ciarlante (1998) and was termed an Asian hierarchy of needs. As opposed to Maslow's hierarchy, the needs on

the top of the Asian pyramid relate to social needs such as status and admiration rather than self esteem and self actualization. This theory indicates greater importance of the collective in Asian societies. In these circumstances, the challenge becomes: how to get individuals to behave in an environmentally significant (and conscious) way? Stern (2000) proposed four distinct environmentally significant behaviour categories: environmental activism, non-activist behaviours in the public sphere, private sphere environmentalism and other environmentally significant behaviours. This study focuses on private-sphere environmentalism because, unlike other public-sphere environmentalism activities, these individual behaviours have direct environmental consequences (Osbaldiston & Sheldon, 2003; Stern, 2000) and are most relevant to consumer decision making.

A core concept within the domain of environmental attitudes is that of attitudes leading to intentions and therefore behaviours. That is, behaviours are planned or reasoned outcomes of intentions and prior attitudes. These are largely based on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and its earlier variant, the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). A first step in these models is that of determining prevailing attitudes. This is instrumental in determining whether or not attitudes and intentions may lead to behaviours in the environmental domain. A common method of measuring attitudes towards the environment is that of the New Environment Paradigm, first used by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978), and its later hybrid, the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig, & Jones, 2000). Surveys using their scales have been undertaken in hundreds of studies and many countries (Hawcroft & Milfont, 2010). In addition to attitudes, values and social norms need to be understood (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, Melech, Lehmann, Burgess, Harris, & Owens, 2001; Thøgersen & Olander, 2003). Research by Thøgersen (2006) and Thøgersen and Olander (2003) found limited evidence that environmentally friendly consumption patterns spread through social groups; however, others have found that group norms are powerful motivators for specific behaviours (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Furthermore, while norms may be the impetus for action, according to Stern, Dietz and Kalhof (1993), the value orientation of the individual is potentially more important with regards to propensity to pay more or perception of the severity of the threat to their environment. In addition, there are deeper cultural values that have been demonstrated to be influential, especially in relation to the NEP (Johnson, Bowker & Cordell, 2004; Vikan, Camino, Biaggio, & Nordvik, 2007).

In order to ascertain if attitudes towards the environment would moderate stated intentions regarding behaviours and product categories, the following hypothesis was established:

H1a: Young adults will adjust their stated intentions regarding purchases in accordance to their stated attitudes: positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in their purchase intentions.

The importance of considering the environment in a broad range of product categories was investigated. Categories were further classified into utilitarian (e.g. food at home, paper for printing, motorbike) and expressive (e.g. clothes, books, laptop, mobile phone, laptop) purchases. The proposition is that young Vietnamese may be less likely to consider the environment with regards to expressive purchase because of the cultural importance placed on status symbols. Therefore, the following two hypotheses were suggested:

H1b: Positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in the young adults' purchase intentions in terms of expressive products.

H1c: Positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in the young adults' purchase intentions in terms of utilitarian products.

Methodology

Data were collected by online survey in English from upwardly mobile Vietnamese students studying at an English speaking university in Vietnam. Online is a means to reach a wider audience in Vietnam, as most middle class Vietnamese have ready access to and are active users of the Internet (General Statistics Office, 2009). A set of questions regarding apposite 'green' behaviours was developed from a student focus group. These items were then asked about from three perspectives: 1) Level of control over whether or not that behaviour could be undertaken (self-efficacy) (Donovan & Henley, 2003; Homburg & Stolberg, 2006; Zavestoski, 2002). 2) How usual the behaviour was within the immediate social circle (social norms) (Cordano, Welcomer, Scherer, Pradenas, & Parada, 2011; Nordlund & Garvill, 2002; Thogersen, 2006; Widegren, 1998). 3) Reported frequency of environmentally friendly behaviours (Bonnes, Passafaro, & Carrus, 2011; Nisbet, Zelenski, & Murphy, 2009).

Reliability was tested in terms of internal consistencies with Cronbach's Alpha (Cronbach, 1951). The Cronbach's Alpha values for all items ranged between .68 and .91 which is considered as being reliable (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2005; Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). Using the process suggested by De Vellis (2003) the sub-scales were combined to generate a single item or index variable. Of the 391 responses to the survey 60.4 percent of the respondents were female and 97.7 percent were between the ages of 18 and 25. 86.5 percent of the respondents were living in Ho Chi Minh City, with the remainder from Ha Noi.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the summary statistics for which all the data are available. The significance of the differences is indicated in the final column. The relationship between attitudes towards the environment as expressed in the NEP and the other variables is significant at the 0.10 level in two cases; and is significant at the 0.05 level for the other variables.

Table 1: Summary statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev	Var	Sig
Expressive purchases	391	1	7	4.2	1.49	2.23	0.08
Utilitarian purchases	391	1	7	3.3	1.50	2.24	0.01
Effectiveness of action	391	1	6	2.7	0.89	0.79	0.00
Importance of action in terms of the environment	391	1	6	2.4	0.89	0.80	0.08
Self-efficacy and control	347	1	7	3.3	1.05	1.11	0.00
How often for the environment	391	1	6	3.4	0.93	0.87	0.01
Reward for behaviour	391	1	7	2.4	0.96	0.93	0.04
Family norms	391	1	6	3.7	0.98	0.95	0.00
NEP Summated scale	391	1	6	3.1	0.68	0.46	
Valid N (listwise)	391						

As a result of these significant differences, the Pearson product-moment coefficients of correlation were calculated for all nine variables in the model; results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Pearson Product Moment Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Expressive Purchases	1								
2 Utilitarian Purchases	.61**	1							
3 Effectiveness of Action	.06	.10	1						
4 Importance for the Environment	.22**	.16**	.51**	1					
5 Self-efficacy and Control	.29**	.21**	.21**	.39**	1				
6 How Often for the Environment	.34**	.31**	.23**	.40**	.71**	1			
7 Reward for Behaviour	.19**	.20**	.26**	.41**	.34**	.35**	1		
8 Family Norms	.22**	.14**	.11*	.22**	.51**	.48**	.24**	1	
9 NEP Summated Scale	.12*	.16**	.14**	.11*	.13*	.12*	.09	.21**	1

**Correlation is significant at the .001 level (2-tailed) *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The results demonstrated a significant number of associations between the variables.

In terms of the original hypotheses, the benchmark variable ‘attitudes towards the environment’ as measured by the NEP, is positively associated with all the variables but at differing levels. Table 3 summarises the hypotheses and outcomes of the research.

Table 3: Results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Outcome
H1a: Young adults will adjust their stated intentions regarding purchases in accordance to their stated attitudes: positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in their purchase intentions.	Positive correlation between NEP and purchase behaviours. Statistically significant at 0.05 level.
H1b: Positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in the young adults’ purchase intentions in terms of expressive products.	The result was not significant at the 0.05 level. However, a difference at the 0.10 level indicating some support for this hypothesis.
H1c: Positive attitudes towards the environment will lead to an increase in consideration for the environment in the young adults’ purchase intentions in terms of utilitarian products.	Result significant at the 0.05 level.

Discussion and conclusion

Whilst ‘greenness’ of a product appears to be at least a moderate consideration for utilitarian purchases, the findings from this study suggests that environmental friendliness is at best low on the list of concerns for this market when deciding on an expressive purchase. For the marketers of environmentally friendly products this represents at least two key challenges: first, to try to shift the attitudes of these upwardly mobile and influential consumers towards thinking of environmental friendliness as an attractive characteristic for potential expressive

purchases. Second, making environmentally friendly alternatives of expressive goods more visible and more widely available in Vietnam.

The shift towards environmentally friendly products being considered as desirable has been an emerging trend in other developed countries (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2008; Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010), and including some in Asia (e.g. Lee, 2009). However, this trend has not yet reached Vietnam, and whilst environmental awareness is generally regarded as positive, environmental friendliness is not normally considered during purchase of expressive goods. Perhaps, this attribute may not be seen as a means to gain admiration of others, nor to reinforce one's own status amongst peers and outsiders. Furthermore, green products may not necessarily equate to luxuriousness in consumers' minds, or even worse, these products may be seen as the reverse: not desirable because they are seen as 'cheap' or 'rustic' alternatives. Other studies have suggested weak links between clothing purchases and concerns for the environment. Kim and Damhorst (1998) studied young Americans and found that environmental concerns (NEP) did not clearly relate to environmentally responsible apparel consumption. That finding is in line with the results of this study, although Kim and Damhorst's (1998) data was collected more than a decade ago and a major shift in awareness, attitudes and behaviour has occurred in the meantime in the US. Whether certain reported behaviours were caused by certain attitudes cannot be positively determined since the data in this study are correlational and not experimental nor longitudinal.

This research illustrates that the current sample of Vietnamese consumers, both upwardly mobile and young, do not consider the environment important with regards to expressive purchases decisions. Nevertheless, they do consider the environment important and, relating to more utilitarian types of purchases, they indicate environmental concern at a higher level. However, as these upwardly mobile young people are increasingly able to buy and consume material goods, this dichotomy is problematic for those concerned with environmental issues. In order to establish 'green' as a worthwhile and appropriately status-filled activity within a context such as this, marketers will perhaps need to change the position green products have in the mind of these consumers.

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