THE ATTITUDE - BEHAVIOR GAP IN ENVIRONMENTAL CONSUMERISM

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ABSTRACT

There is currently a challenging environment for marketers of environmentally friendly consumer products. While there is evidence that consumers are willing to pay more for green products there is also evidence of a gap between attitude and behavior. Consumers are not buying green products they claim when polled. This paper provides a review of the literature regarding the attitude-behavior gap in environmental consumerism. Two moderators are suggested under which the attitude-behavior relationship might be strengthened: level of consumer involvement and perceived consumer effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Research and opinion polls (The Roper Organization 1992) claim that despite American consumers expressing concern about the environment, they are unwilling to purchase or pay a higher price for environmentally friendly products (Ottman 1992, Schlossberg 1991, Jay 1990). These same studies also reveal that consumers don't buy the green products that they claim when polled (Jay 1990). A more recent report by Roper organization (2002) showed that environmental concern amongst the general population was on a decline with 59% of the general population not even thinking of participating in environmentally friendly activities. Despite a waning interest in overall environmental protection, the same poll surprisingly revealed that contrary to the above pattern, Americans were willing to purchase and even pay more for specific products that help conserve energy or are less polluting, such as major appliances, hybrid cars and electricity.

These results reveal a challenging consumer environment for marketers of environmentally friendly consumer non-durable products, i.e. green products. As a result, managers desire guidance on how to position environmental friendly actions (Osterhus 1997). An overall decline in environmentally friendly behaviors has accounted for a decrease in green buying or environmental consumerism with only 23% of the polled consumers having bought products made from recycled material, down 3% from the previous year (Roper 2002).

The lack of research to understand the green purchase process has compounded the puzzling question about why despite an overwhelming concern towards the environment (attitude) consumers fail to purchase environmentally friendly or green products (behavior)?

The objective of this conceptual paper is to provide a review of literature related to the attitude - behavior gap in the area of environmental consumerism (green buying). The review will focus on the profile of the green consumer, predictors of green buying behavior and the attitude-behavior gap. Although there are many potential predictors of behavior, this discussion will focus on the attitude toward environmentally-friendly products as the key predictor. The authors propose two personal norm conditions to strengthen the attitude – behavior link: level of consumer involvement with the environmental issue and perceived consumer effectiveness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

While it is difficult to understand the size of the green consumer segment, marketing managers realize that environmental issues are important to some consumer segments and this translates into decisions about product offerings and pricing tactics (Osterhus 1997). It is often difficult for researchers to measure actual behavior thus attitude measurements are hoped to predict behavior.

This paper focuses on one specific environmental conscious behavior – *environmental consumerism or green buying*. Environmental consumerism is defined as a consumer's purchase behavior influenced by environmental concerns (Shrum et al. 1995) to seek products and services with minimal impact on the environment (Mainieri et al. 1997). Simply, it translates into consumption behaviors such as purchase of green products and services (Easterling et al. 1995), such as purchasing products made from recycled paper.

Green Consumer Profile

A review of literature in the area of environmental consumerism revealed a bulk of research directed towards building a descriptive profile of the green consumer by using geographic (Samdahl and Robertson, 1989), cultural (Webster, 1975), personality (Kinnear et al. 1974) and a variety of socio-demographic measures. However, despite in-depth investigation and popular belief socio-demographic variables have proven to be poor predictors of environmentally responsible behaviors (Kinnear et al. 1974; Weigel 1977; Antil 1984a; Balderjahn 1988; Samdahl and Robertson 1989; Roberts 1996). Though there is moderate support that suggests a significant correlation between gender, age income, location and environmentally responsible behavior (Tognacci et al. 1972; Buttel and Flinn 1978) Compared to socio-demographic variables, personality traits (such as tolerance, understanding and harm avoidance) were found to be significant predictors of environmental responsible behaviors (Kinnear et al. 1974; Arbuthnot 1977; Borden and Francis 1978; Antil 1984a). In other words, those who were more open to new ideas (tolerance) with a strong desire to know how things work (understanding) and is concerned about being harmed by pollution would be more concerned about the environment.

Despite the paucity of dependable data that supports the use of socio-economic variables as an effective way to profile the green consumers, organizations such as The Roper Starch Worldwide continue to segment the U.S. consumer market into five environmental segments: true blue greens, greenback greens, sprouts, grousers and basic browns. Another lifestyle segmentation classification is the use of three distinct groups, planet passionates, health fanatics and animal lovers (J. Ottman Consulting, Inc., 1995).

Predictors

Compounding the above challenge (difficulty to accurately profile the environmentally conscious consumer segment) for green marketers, researchers have discovered a low degree of correlation between pro-environmental attitude and environmentally responsible behavior (Wagner 1997). In other words, individuals exhibit positive attitudes towards the environment but fail to execute these attitudes by engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors, i.e., purchasing green products. In one of the earliest studies on linking buying behavior with attitude toward the environment, Simmons Market Research Bureau (1991) found that U.S. consumer to not follow through and buy products they report to prefer.

Research suggests that while socio-demographic and psychographic variables are significantly correlated with the verbal expression of concern about environmental issues (attitude), these variables share no or weak relationships with environmentally relevant actions, i.e. environmental consumerism (Weigel 1977). As a result, there is a need to focus on identifying the correlates and determinants of environmentally relevant behaviors rather than environmental attitudes (Endo and Neilsen 1974).

Attitude - Behavior Gap

For marketers of green products, the gap between pro-environmental attitudes and green purchase behavior of the green consumer segment is a daunting challenge. An attitude is defined as "an enduring set of beliefs about an object that predisposes people to behave in particular way toward the object" (Weigel 1983, p. 257). Theory in the area of consumer attitude argues that individuals behave in ways consistent with their attitudes. However, research in the area has shown both positive relationships between attitude toward the environment and behavior (Arbuthnot 1977; Kellgren and Wood, 1986) as well as weak relationships (Wicker, 1969; Webster, 1975; Manieri et al, 1997, Tanner and Kast, 2003). Laroche, Bergeron and Barbaro-Forleo (2001) found a positive relationship between attitudes and willingness to spend more for green products when it was convenient to behave in an environmental favorable manner.

This attitude-behavior gap has been attributed to: low correlations among environmental behaviors, different levels of specificity in the attitude-behavior measures, effects of external variables and lack of measurement reliability and validity (Mainieri et al. 1997). Research has shown that pro-environmental behaviors are not significantly correlated (Tracy and Oskamp 1983-84) where an individual who performs one type of such behavior e.g. carpooling is also likely to engage in other similar behaviors such as recycling. Lack of measurement specificity between attitude and behavior suggests that the inconsistency exists as a result of researchers failing to measure behavior-specific attitude instead focusing on a generalized view of environmental attitude (Gardner and Stern, 1996; Manieri et al., 1997) and behavior. Therefore, measuring attitudes towards a highly specific object or behavior will predict that highly specific behavior (Heberlein et al. 1976, Weigel et al. 1974). Personal (knowledge, motivation or attitudes) and situational

(social norms, other attractive choices or economic constraints) factors may also confound the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior (Mainieri et al. 1997).

It has been suggested that consumers are ambivalent (Shrum, McCarty and Lowrey, 1995) and may be confused on how to put their intentions regarding environmental consumerism into practice (Simmons and Widmar, 1990). Mainieri et. al (1997) found that respondents expressing favorable environmental viewpoints did not translate their attitudes into product purchases.

As a result, there exists some pessimism regarding the ability of general environmental attitudes to predict purchase behavior (Berger and Corbin, 1992). According to Wicker (1969), attitudes are more likely unrelated or slightly related to overt behavior. Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) argue that by incorporating other external variables such as personal and social norms and matching the specificity of attitude and behavior, the link between attitudes and behavior may be strengthened. Weigel (1983) suggests that examining personal and situational characteristics would offer a more accurate insight into attitude-behavior link in environmental consumerism.

Conceptual Framework

This paper expands on the explanatory framework existent in literature by proposing two individual moderating conditions under which attitude - behavior relationship in green buying might be strengthened – level of consumer involvement with the environmental issue and perceived consumer effectiveness. We use environmental consumerism interchangeably with the green consumer. Thus following the lead of Shrum et al. (1995) and Mainieri et al. (1997), we define the green consumer is one whose purchase behavior is influenced by environmental concerns.

In taking the above moderator variable approach, the authors agree with Berger and Corbin (1992) "that environmental attitudes may sometimes be poor predictors of behaviors and…seek to specify variables that systematically moderate the attitude-behavior relationship" (p.80).

Consumer Involvement with the Environmental Issue

Researchers define involvement as a "causal or motivating variable with a number of consequences on the consumer's purchase and communication variable" (Laurent and Kapferer 1985 p. 42) such as decision making, interest in advertising, brand commitment, frequency of product usage (Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Zaichowsky 1985), shopping enjoyment and social observations of product/brand usage (Mittal and Lee 1989).

A common thread among the various definitions of involvement has been to conceptualize the construct in terms of "perceived personal relevance" (Bloch and Richins 1983; Zaichkowsky 1985) where, "a consumer's level of involvement with an object, situation or action is determined by the degree to which s/he perceives that concept to be personally relevant" (p. 211, Celsi and Olson 1988). The level of personal relevance or importance (Mittal 1995) with an object is represented by the perceived linkage between an individual's needs, goals, and values (self - knowledge) and their product knowledge (attributes and benefits). To the extent that product characteristics are associated with personal goals and values, the consumer will experience strong feelings of personal relevance or involvement with the product. In other words, the more the issue or object becomes integrated with the individual's values, the higher the level of involvement (Mitchell 1979). Therefore, in order to accurately reflect the experiential nature of this construct, Celsi and Olson (1988) suggest the term "felt involvement" and propose that the feeling of personal relevance is an outcome of both individual characteristics and the situational context and is only experienced at certain times and situations. Other key predictors of involvement are perceived importance of the product or purchase situation, perceived risk associated with the product purchase, product symbolism and the hedonic value of the product (Laurent and Kapferer 1985).

Consumer researchers and marketers have widely the used the concept of personal self relevance/importance to segment consumer markets for products and services based on a high vs. low dichotomy of consumer involvement. In addition to the high - low dichotomy, a conceptual distinction can also be drawn between a consumer's involvement in a product and his/her involvement in those tasks or activities that are related to this product, such as information search and acquisition, product purchase and product consumption or use (Antil 1984b). Research has also differentiated between behavioral and attitudinal involvement (Stone 1984) in an attempt to clear some of the obscurity over the clarity of the involvement concept. A *behavioral* definition of involvement is defined as time and/or intensity of effort expended in the undertaking of behavior with the *attitudinal* concept associated with the ego – a concept comprised of a constellation of attitudes that reflects on the very being of the individual. The proponents of this position (Sherif and Centril 1947)

argued that highly involved individuals would be most likely to "take a stand" on an issue.

This paper extends the high vs. low dichotomy of consumer involvement in the realm of environmental consumerism and argues that a high level of involvement with the environment or a specific environmental issue will bridge the attitude-behavior gap plaguing green products. Therefore, for an individual who is significantly involved with the environmental issue of forest conservation, a product made of recyclable paper will solicit positive attitudes and purchase intent. On the other hand, a low level of involvement with an environmental issue, i.e. water quality protection will not benefit a product that promises to reduce water pollution (e.g. phosphate free laundry detergent) by triggering a positive attitude and purchase intent. A high level of product involvement has been hypothesized to lead to greater perception of attribute differences, perception of greater product importance and greater commitment to brand choice.

Building on this argument we suggest that an individual who is an advocate and a believer of environmental protection (i.e. experiences a high level of involvement with the environment) will experience low levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency and will be more likely to purchase a "green" product than an individual who is not. Hence,

P1: Low involvement consumers will display higher levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

P2. High involvement consumers will display higher levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

Perceived Consumer Effectiveness

The perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) variable measures the extent to which a respondent believes that an individual consumer can be effective in pollution abatement by registering responses to scale items such as "I strongly believe that taking mass transit to work would result in a lower ozone level in my area." The PCE variable was obtained from responses to the following statement in the research by Kinnear et al. (1974): "It is futile for the individual consumer to try to do anything about the pollution." Berger and Corbin (1992) differentiate PCE from attitude in that the latter represents a summary evaluation of an individual's beliefs or feelings about an issue, while PCE represents an evaluation of the self in the context of the issue. According to them, an individual may feel very concerned about an environmental issue and at the same time totally helpless in his or her ability to have an impact on the problem through his or her own consumption. These individuals are likely to have high attitude scores but low PCE scores and most likely low scores on measures of environmentally friendly purchases. We propose the following:

P3: Consumer with lower levers of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) will display higher levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

P4: Consumers with high levels of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) will display higher levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

By combining the two moderators in question, level of involvement (low, high) and perceived consumer effectiveness (low, high) on a two by two matrix, the following situations emerge (Table 1):

Table 1: Combining Involvement and PCE

		Level of Involvement	
Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE)	*High*	Idealistic Consumer	Intentionally Green Consumer
	Low	Accidental Purchase	Sometimes Green
		Low	*High*

Intentionally Green: This consumer displays both high levels of involvement and perceived consumer effectiveness. These consumers will display the highest levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

Idealist Consumer: The idealistic consumer believes in his/her ability to effect change in the environment but is low in the involvement required to carry through with the belief. In this case their will be high levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

Accidental Purchaser: This consumer doesn't believe he/she has an impact on the environment and does not actively pursue green products. If he/she does buy a green product it is through accident. In this case there will be high levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

Sometimes Green: This consumer has a low level of perceived consumer effectiveness but is highly involved in the selection of some green products. Because of the low level of perceived individual effectiveness on the environment, the consumer will display higher levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

Discussion

The conceptual framework offered in this paper directly responds to the need in literature suggested by Berger and Corbin (1992) to identify other moderating variables that help highlight conditions which strengthen attitude-behavior consistency. The framework contributes to the environmental consumerism literature by proposing the moderating influence of level of involvement and perceived consumer effectiveness on the attitude-behavior link. A review of the literature has increased the understanding of notable research in the area.

For managers, this framework provides additional information to help segment the green consumer market. With increasing environmental consciousness, companies need to understand green consumers' behavior by examining factors that influence 'green' purchases. This framework helps managers of green products understand the green consumer by identifying factors that elaborate on the process of environmental consumerism. With demographic and psychographic variables having been proven as being inadequate in profiling the green buying segments in the market, shedding light on personal norms such as PCE and involvement produces invaluable knowledge to help accurately segment this market. Inappropriate segmentation entirely based on demographic (i.e. gender and age) and psychographic variables (i.e. personality and lifestyle) is a risk to the company by targeting a segment with unprofitable responses. Instead, segmenting the market based on a combination of demographic, psychographic and individual characteristics promises to produce more accurate segments.

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