

INTERVENTIONS TO ENCOURAGE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PRACTICES AMONG CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes interventions at the market and government levels to encourage sustainable consumption behaviours and purchase decisions among consumers. Sustainable consumption is obstructed by an inconsistency of consumers' behaviours with their sustainable attitudes. To dispel this attitude-behaviour gap, interventions must be designed to tackle the challenges to the manifestation of sustainable consumption. To this effect, challenges hindering the effectuation of sustainable consumption practices are also encapsulated. Secondary research and analysis have been employed.

Introduction

The United Nations defines sustainable consumption as involving consumption practices that can do "better with less". It is the consumption of goods and services that have been produced by methods that have reduced environmental footprints (Simsch, Bartková, and Senal, 2021).

With the world increasingly grappling with the ramifications of climate change, businesses and governments around the world are placing increased emphasis on sustainable products and promoting eco-friendly consumption practices among consumers. However, it has been observed that while most consumers claim to support sustainable consumption practices, their claims fail to manifest into concrete, consistent practices in the market, creating an attitude-behaviour gap (Van Dam & Van Trijp, 2013). Most market domains have two extreme segments of consumers when it comes to sustainable consumption. The first segment comprises committed, responsible consumers that account for the majority of sustainable consumption in the market but form the minority segment (Brown, Dury, & Holdsworth, 2009; De Ferran & Grunert, 2007; Fotopoulos, Krystallis, & Ness, 2003; Zander & Hamm, 2010). The other segment of consumers consists of "*honestly disengaged*" (defra, 2008) and "*a-motivated*" (van Dam and van Trijp, 2016) consumers who are unconcerned about incorporating sustainable development goals into their daily

purchasing decisions and do not see any benefits from doing so. However, between the two extremes of the sustainable motivation spectrum lies a grey area of light users of eco-friendly products who make sustainable choices only incidentally. They also form the majority segment in most market domains and require some form of extrinsic motivation to increase their sustainable consumption practices (van Dam and van Trijp, 2016). This necessitates interventions, both in governmental and market capacities, to bridge the gap their attitude-behaviour gap. Such interventions must be designed to tackle the causes of this attitude-behaviour gap, i.e., the challenges to sustainable consumption. While more effective for the middle range of consumers, these interventions may sometimes prove fruitful in encouraging sustainable consumption practices for a-motivated consumers as well.

Challenges to Sustainable Consumption

1. Intangibility of Outcomes stemming from Psychological Distance

Within the Construal Level Theory, psychological distance has been defined as "*a cognitive separation between the self and other instances such as persons, events, or times.*" (Bălăţescu, 2014). Consumers' perceptions and experiences are limited to events, persons and circumstances within the present. Experiencing anything beyond the present is only made possible through a mental construal, which serves as a mental image of a future reality (Van Dam and Van Trijp, 2016). Future pay-offs are undesirable to most consumers because the outcomes of sustainable behaviours only manifest in the long term (Hardisty and Weber, 2009), as most traditional consumption is associated with more immediate results. The psychological distance between sustainable consumption practices and their outcomes also creates a sense of abstractness and uncertainty, making sustainable development appear as a psychologically distant event, further discouraging active sustainable actions (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019). Consumers tend to gravitate towards more short-term, immediate rewards for their actions owing to hyperbolic discounting.

2. Costs to the Self

Adhering to the rational consumer model, consumers engage in purchase behaviour that satisfies their wants and needs owing to self-interest (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019). Sustainable behaviours often involve costs to consumers' self-interest such as more effort, poor quality or poor aesthetics. (Luchs and Kumar, 2017).

3. The Need for Collective Action

Effective sustainable behaviours need collective action, in contrast with "*traditional consumer behaviours*" that yield benefits and outcomes with individual action only. (Bamberg, Rees, and

Seebauer, 2015). Collective action stands as a challenge to the encouragement of sustainable consumption practices due to social influences because a large proportion of an individual consumer's consumption practices are influenced by the actions and opinions of those around him/her/them (herd behaviour). Given that collective efficacy has not gained significant importance in the realm of sustainability, herd behaviour serves as a major obstacle to the realisation of sustainable consumption (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019).

4. The Need for Habit Formation

Habit is referred to as a phenomenon whereby a particular behaviour persists because *"it has become an automatic response to a particular, regularly encountered, context."* (Kurz et al., 2014) With sustainable consumption being a relatively new concept, the status quo has been unsustainable consumption practices such that they have evolved into habitual practices rather than controlled actions (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019). A habit change requires effort, time, and dedication. In the case of sustainable behaviour, the extended time frame of outcome realisation discourages consumers from changing their habits.

Interventions

Changing the Psychological Construal Level

Currently, consumers perceive sustainable consumption with a high-level construal, rendering it an *"abstract and distant goal"* that is *"relevant and desirable"* generally but not beneficial in the short run (Van Dam & Va Trijp, 2013). Thus, there is a need to change consumers' perception of outcomes and rewards of sustainable consumption practices from a high construal to a low construal to bridge the existing *"attitude-to-behaviour"* gap. Past research recommends the following interventionist policies and practices to accomplish the same:

1. Concretization of Sustainable Outcomes

This involves reducing the intangibility of sustainable outcomes by shifting the focus of these outcomes to the present in lieu of distant rewards. Emphasizing current events such as extreme weather changes or recent impacts of climate change on living standards and ecosystems (Li, Johnson, and Zaval 2011; Paswan, Guzmán, and Lewin 2017) can add immediacy to sustainable practices by highlighting the adverse effects of unsustainable consumption in the present. This should be complemented by defining clear steps for mitigating these adverse effects through the employment of *"vivid imagery, analogies, and narratives."* Thus, using advertising or promotional campaigns for sustainable products that focus on the present context of sustainable consumption rather than its distant, abstract outcomes can effectively shift sustainability to a low construal.

2. Habit Formation

To encourage consistent and long-term sustainable consumption, the status quo for purchasing practices must change. This implies changing consumers' "*automatic response*" (Kurz et al., 2014) to purchasing cues, which must be approached multifariously to be effective. One approach is the imposition of penalties, which maybe taxes, fines, or tariffs, on the consumption of unsustainable products. This is a regulatory intervention requiring close supervision of consumption choices, involving costs. While the legal implication of penalties can guarantee some degree of reduction in unsustainable consumption, if consumers perceive such penalties as unreasonable, they may produce negative or defensive reactions (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019).

Another manner of encouraging habit formation is by inculcating clear steps to sustainable consumption in the consumers' minds. This can be achieved by making sustainable choices the default option (Frederiks, Stenner, and Hobman 2015;

Theotokis and Manganari 2015). Owing to consumers' bounded rationality and limited cognitive abilities, default options become the easier choice for consumers as opposed to intensive alternative evaluation (Simon, 1955).

Furthermore, prompts indicating to consumers the desired sustainable consumption action before carrying out the action itself can nudge consumers towards sustainable practices. These prompts can be particularly useful for encouraging recycling and sustainable energy usage (Lehman and Geller 2004). Prompts must be straightforward, easy to follow, and provided consistently over a long period to be efficacious (White, Habib, and Hardisty, 2016).

Offering incentives such as subsidisation or tax rebates for eco-friendly products and giving consumers feedback on their present sustainable actions compared to past unsustainable practices can also lead to sustainable habit formation. (White, Habib, and Hardisty, 2016).

3. Personal and Social Identities

According to Dunning (2007), consumers desire to maintain positive self-views through their consumption. Moreover, consumers also possess a sense of "*social identity*" in being members of different social groups wherein their behaviours are largely influenced by the behaviours of ingroup members (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Linking sustainable consumption to these identities can be instrumental in encouraging long-term sustainable behaviours in purchase decisions. Self-identity can be magnified by focusing on the self-benefits of sustainable consumption (Green and Peloza 2014; Nolan et al., 2008). Also,

highlighting the difference consumers can make by adopting sustainable practices without bringing attention to the compromises involved in the process can bolster self-efficacy, encouraging sustainable consumption. Self-identities can also be bolstered by portraying sustainable consumption as a morally right act, especially for consumers with a high sense of moral identity (Reed, Aquino, and Levy 2007). However, as intrinsically social beings, approaches to connecting sustainability to self-identity are futile if not complemented by social influences. Drawing consumers' attention to a large group of individuals undertaking sustainable practices can be effective, but only when these practices are adopted by the majority. Another method to use social influence for sustainable consumption encouragement is by emphasising the "*social desirability*" of such actions. However, the efficacy of this approach is limited by other aspects of identity that are deemed more important in the given spatial and cultural context. For instance, in a study, males avoided eco-friendly practices due to their association with "*feminine traits*" (Brough et al. 2016; White, Habib, and Hardisty, 2016).

Social influences should also be implemented in the capacity of public settings through identity signalling, wherein consciousness about perception by the public eye can encourage sustainable practices (Green and Peloza 2014; Griskevicius, Tybur, and Bergh 2010), particularly in an environment where such practices serve as the norm.

Thus, sustainable consumption should be recommended by motivating the individual self through an interdependent self-construal (ingroup influences).

4. Emotional Associations

Communications to instil fear among consumers regarding the negative consequences of unsustainable consumption can lead consumers to feel guilty when current outcomes are highlighted because consumers paint themselves as responsible for such outcomes (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). Drawing focus on plausible future ramifications if sustainable practises are not followed can imbibe "anticipated guilt" in consumers, encouraging pro-environmental behaviours (Kaiser and Shimoda 1999). Besides negative emotional associations, a positive emotional association of pride in undertaking sustainable practises can also encourage sustainable behaviours (Antonetti and Maklan 2014). Can be especially effective when sustainable practices are highlighted as the more desirable social action. Another means of positive emotional association with sustainable purchase practises is through celebrity endorsements, where the identification of these practises with recognised, reputed, and influential figures can elicit feelings of awe and inspiration in consumers, thus encouraging them to emulate the sustainable practises of their role models (White, Habib, and Hardisty, 2016).

5. Eco-friendly Marketing

Eco-labelling products with "attention-grabbing, understandable, and consistent" messages can encourage sustainable consumption. However, eco-labels merely highlighting the benefits of sustainable consumption alone are ineffective. These labels must be contrasted against negative labels of environmentally detrimental consequences of unsustainable actions (Borin, Cerf, and Krishnan 2011). Moreover, adding the certification of a third party to validate sustainability claims can increase the credibility of such labels and nudge consumers more effectively towards sustainable consumption (Manget, Roche, and Münnich 2009).

Marketers can also strategically use framing bias to nudge consumers towards the consumption of eco-friendly products. Loss aversion states that consumers care more about future losses than future gains because the pain from losses is twice as powerful as the satisfaction from gains, leading them to be loss-averse (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Following this bias, energy-efficient appliances should be packaged with labels that emphasise the energy costs of not using them instead of energy savings from them (Bull 2012; Min et al., 2014). This can be made more effective by having labels state aggregate or lifetime energy costs (Camilleri and Larrick 2014). Furthermore, when complemented with information about steps to tackle such losses, nudges through framing become more efficacious. However, framing and labeling can affect different consumer segments differently based on their values. For instance, in a study conducted by Hardisty, Johnson, and Weber (2010), framing carbon pricing in light of an offset rather than a tax had a powerful impact on Republicans but only a moderate one on Democrats. For more effective framing, primary market research through surveying is recommended to cater product labels to different consumer segments.

Conclusion

The prevalence of an attitude-behaviour gap among the vast majority of consumers in markets for sustainable purchase practices necessitates the implementation of extrinsic motivators that can encourage sustainable behaviours in them. These motivators can serve as interventions that aim to tackle the obstacles to the manifestation of their sustainable attitudes into realistic practices.

Perceived as a high construal, sustainable outcomes are often abstract, uncertain and distant if not communicated in the context of the present. Effort and time-consuming new habit formation further discourage sustainable consumption, alongside self-costs and compromises of satisfaction and pleasure that must be compromised.

Effective interventions for consumers to overcome the aforementioned challenges and engage in sustainable consumption, in the long run, involve concretization of sustainable outcomes with a present contextual focus, habit formation, association of individual and social identities with

sustainability, evoking emotions of guilt and pride for unsustainable and sustainable purchase decisions respectively, and eco-friendly marketing. Each of these interventions does not promise an absolute increase in sustainable consumption. Employing an amalgamation of these interventions is necessary to achieve significant changes in consumption practices. Furthermore, these interventions must be consistent and sustained over long periods to have effective results.

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