Socially Conscious Consumer Behavior: the Role of Ethical Self-Identity in the Use of Mental Accounting

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An on-line experiment demonstrated the importance of consumers' ethical self-identity (ESI) in socially conscious consumer intentions. An assimilation effect took place; priming positive environmentalism led to more environmentally sensitive purchase intentions. The impact of priming depended upon one’s level of ESI.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT:
More and more consumers are reporting a shift toward socially and environmentally conscious purchasing behaviours (Freestone & McGoldrick, 2008), and in many cases it is a salient buying criterion (Memery, Megicks, & Williams, 2005). This study examines socially responsible consumption through the lens of ethical self-identity, priming, and mental accounting.

Self-identity is important because self-perceptions can shape people’s behaviour (Aquino, Reed, Felps, Freeman, & Lin, 2009). It should not be surprising that consumers judge who they are by their decisions, but the reverse is also true -- these identities can also be important in influencing their environmental choices.

Importantly, judgments of self-identity can sometimes be influenced very easily. Priming has been shown to impact consumers’ intentions and behaviors in a multitude of studies. Priming is expected to impact consumer behavior here such that positively priming environmentalism will increase environmental intentions. In this study, priming is used to illuminate one possible process through which consumers choose or reject socially conscious consumer behaviour.

How does this happen? Mental accounting is an approach that has been used to explain how consumers account for their purchase decisions (Heath & Soll, 1996), and can be seen as a substitute for the standard economic theory of the consumer where consumers maximize the utility of their decisions (Thaler, 1985). The goal of individuals with high levels of dispositional environmental self-identity (ESI) may be to keep track of behaviors to maximize these socially conscious behaviors. More mental accounting is expected to occur in individuals high in ESI because keeping mental track of their socially conscious consumer behaviors allows them to reinforce their existing self-identity.

REFERENCES


