The Green Dilemma: Libertarian Values Trump Communal Values

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We report the results of a large scale survey (N=4,082) of adult American consumers which segments the market on the basis of consumers’ attitudes toward the environment and how these different consumer segments engage (or, more often, don’t engage) in pro-environmental consumer behaviors. The paper’s primary contribution is in identifying different segments of consumers based on their attitudes and beliefs regarding the environment, and linking these segments to green behaviors. The presentation concludes with a discussion of diverse theoretical approaches which recognizes that for each of these segments there is a need for new understandings into how to further cultivate and increase green behaviors.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

While the environmental movement in the United States is not new, its history is characterized by a series of stops and starts. Many view Carson’s *Silent Spring* as the beginning of the modern environmental movement. In exposing the toxic hazards of many widely-used pesticides and herbicides posed for non-targeted organisms, Carson’s work raised awareness and prompted a new public discourse. American consumers began to re-conceptualize everyday decisions as affecting the interconnected environmental web. Disturb the web in one area and the entire web trembles from the impact (Carson 1962). In their growing concern about pollution, suburbanization, and pesticides, American consumers began to understand, or at least to develop incipient awareness that their consumption choices have a broader, sometimes far-reaching impact on the environment. Yet this begs the question of how much has changed since the 1960s.

In 1989, just months prior to the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, a nationally representative survey of 1000 American consumers found that 89% of shoppers claimed to be concerned about the environmental impact of the products and services they purchased. Nearly as many (78%) said they would be willing to pay a premium for a product packaged with recyclable or biodegradable materials (Makower, 2009). And the beat goes on...Numerous commercial market research efforts provide consistent evidence that American consumers are aware of and concerned about environmental issues (MINtEl, 2008; American Environics, 2008; Bonini and Oppenheim/McKinsey, 2008; Karel and Neufeld/Yankelovich, 2007; Pike et.al./Earth Justice, 2008; LOHAS, 2009). While all these surveys report high levels of awareness and concern for issues that are variously described as “Environmentalism,” “Sustainable Consumption,” “The Environment,” or in its simplest and most generic term, “Green,” these studies also consistently report that few consumers translate their concerns into action. Most American consumers will not go out of their way to find “green” products and about one-half say that price premiums prevent them from buying “green.” American consumers “Talk the Green Talk,” but do not “Shop the Green Walk.” This chronically weak relationship between Green Awareness/Attitudes and Green Behavior provides both the rationale and the focus of this Special Session proposal.

For decades, scholars have studied the relationships between attitudes, social norms, cultural context(s), rational decision making processes, and behaviors. With respect to Green in particular, a key challenge becomes applying such research. Thus, the challenge is to create a paradigm shift in how consumers think about and act with respect to the environment. How can consumer behavior research play a role in moving “green behaviors” (however broadly defined) from being a set of values and behaviors that is present in only small segments of American society to one of green(er) values and behaviors that are part of the mainstream marketplace?

This special session offers theoretical perspectives and empirical support that challenge us to take up and apply our discipline’s talents for transformative research on an issue that has meaning, and does matter on the ground, in the market, right now (Mick, 2006; 2007). The likely audiences for this session includes researchers with an interest in transformative consumer research as a general domain, those with specific interests in green marketing and consumption, consumer reactivity, consumer resistance and practice theory, as well as colleagues with interests in applying theoretical perspectives in the public interest.

Our focus is on proposing research perspectives to better understand the multitude of reasons as to why consumers have been so reluctant to move from high levels of awareness and concern for the environment towards behaviors of sustainable consumption. We argue that green consumption behaviors must be understood within the context of a process of increasing individualization, where consumers can find ways to feel both responsible and empowered in dealing with environmental risks to both the wider global planet and themselves. The papers in this session recognize that Green is multi-layered and complex; that “Green-Washing” makes consumers feel cynical and confused; that Green is imbued with social status and is seen by many as divisive as opposed to uniting; and that consumer’s feelings are accompanied by reactivity, resistance, doubts and insecurities about the consumer choices we all face (Dolan, 2002; Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Kilbourne and Carlson, 2008; Englis and Bamossy, 2009; Lorenzen, 2009; LOHAS 2009).

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

“Green Dilemma: Libertarian Values Trump Communal Values”

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We report the results of a large scale survey of American consumers which segments the market on the basis of consumers’ attitudes toward the environment and how these different consumer segments engage (or, more often, don’t engage) in pro-environmental consumer behaviors. As noted earlier, various industry studies estimate that 80-90% of American consumers are aware of and concerned about environmental issues, but far fewer translate their concerns into action. However, most consumers will not go out of their way to find “green” products and about one-half say that price premiums prevent them from buying “green” (Mintel 2008). A key question that consumer researchers should address is how (or perhaps, “can”?) we create a paradigm shift in how consumers’ think about and act with respect to the environment. To contextualize this research within the framework of Transformative Consumer Research, how can we re-position sustainable consumption from being a niche behavior to become a more widespread behavior adopted in a more consistent manner by the majority of consumers?

There is some industry research which gives us insights on segments of green consumers. One study found that approximately 12% of the U.S. population (about 35 million people) were “True Green” consumers (Mintel 2008)—consumers who not only regularly buy green products, but also incorporate green behaviors such as reducing consumption, re-using products when possible, and recycling. Another study identifies a population segment characterized by a “Lifestyle Of Health And Sustainability” (French and Rogers 2008), and there is even a website devoted to the LOHAS lifestyle (www.lohas.com). With a few exceptions (e.g., Diekmann and Preisendorfer 2003; Ger 1999; Thorson, Thomas and Moore 1995; Meijer and Schuyt 2005), we find far less emphasis in the current consumer research or marketing literatures on studying consumers attitudes toward environmental issues and these
attitudes do (or do not) impact consumers’ behavior. Our research explores how the U.S. population is segmented according to their attitudes toward environmental issues and how these attitudes map onto pro-environmental behaviors.

We conducted a large-scale survey using a sample of 4,082 adults drawn from a commercially maintained online consumer panel and matched to the demographic profile of the U.S. population (income, gender, age, geography, and ethnicity). We asked participants to fill out the New Ecological Paradigm Scale, an instrument designed to capture respondents’ general orientations toward the environment (see Dunlap et al. 2000 for a review of this scale’s development). We also asked respondents to complete an extensive battery of items about their pro-environment behaviors (adapted from Barr 2006; Cordano, Welcomer and Scherer 2003; McDonald and Oates 2006).

Using factor, cluster, and discriminant analyses to identify consumer segments and provide various forms of evidence regarding validity of the results, our analyses of this extensive attitudinal and behavioral data reveal several interesting findings: consistent with prior research (Mintel 2008) we found that nearly 70% of consumers hold pro-environmental attitudes, although the correlations between environmental attitudes and environmental behaviors vary greatly across segments, and for many types of behaviors, within segments. Further, more than 30% of the population is largely indifferent to environmental issues despite the large amount of recent media coverage concerning global warming (e.g., An Inconvenient Truth) and pollution (e.g., prior to the Beijing Olympics). In addition to reporting on the underlying attitudinal and behavioral differences between segments, we also have strong empirical support regarding fundamental differences in beliefs about our basic role as consumers, and the impact of our consumption on the environment. One large segment of consumers believes that there are basic limits to human growth, while another large segment believes that growth can be achieved without harming the environment. A third relatively small group (11%) expresses environmental concerns but also believes that humans should “rule over nature.” This segment of consumers tends to hold a more optimistic view (e.g., that human ingenuity can overcome negative environmental consequences), while also exhibiting just modest levels of pro-environmental behavior overall.

The descriptive contribution of identifying different segments of consumers based on their attitudes and beliefs regarding the environment, and examining their lack of green behavior is a first step. The important second step is to recognize that within each of these existing segments which vary in their attitudes and behaviors, there is a need for new understanding into how to further cultivate and increase green behaviors. This goal is at the heart of Transformative Consumer Research, and is the key focus of this paper, and presentation.

“Change Is In the Air?”

Steven French, Natural Marketing Institute1, USA

This paper discusses key findings taken from NMI’s 2007 and 2008 Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) Consumer Trends Database® (LCTD), an annual quantitative study which measures and describes the marketplace for LOHAS products, the consumers who use them, consumers’ expectations of corporate behavior, and attitudes toward environmental and social issues. In this presentation, particular attention is paid to evolving consumers’ attitudes, behaviors, and product/service usage patterns. Based on nationally representative surveys of 4,033 and 2,074 consumers conducted in July 2008 and July of 2007 respectively, the data clearly suggests that despite the economic crisis currently facing consumers, there continues to be high levels of concern about environmental issues and that consumers want to “act green.” But at the same time, the findings point to a marketplace of consumers who are overwhelmed with green information and green dilemmas, tensions surrounding “green-washing,” and confusion about just what is the best and most “green” course of action.

In just the past year, concern and discussion about environmental issues has soared by 30% (from 2007 to 2008), with more consumers reporting that “everywhere they turn people are talking about the environment” (LOHAS, 2009). At the same time, consumers increasingly do not want to make a sacrifice when buying environmentally-friendly products. Rather, consumers report feeling that manufacturers have had enough time to successfully integrate green benefits into products and that the purchase of “green” products should come without sacrifice in performance or inconvenience in acquisition. Furthermore, there is evidence that consumers are moving away from eco-friendly products that do not deliver on traditional attributes and benefits of products. Consistent with this finding, the data also show that while consumer concern about the environment is increasing, their purchasing decisions continue to be determined mainly by price (a factor for the acquisition of almost all goods and services).

Consumers are also more likely to report feeling overwhelmed, saying that it is too difficult to consider all of the impacts of their actions. For example, upgrading old appliances to energy-efficient models means that old appliances will be sent to a landfill since appliance recycling can be inconvenient and costly. Buying Fair Trade fruit from Chile means foregoing local options that require fewer greenhouse gas emissions in transit. An issue in developing more mainstream adoption of sustainable consumption behaviors is that consumers feel it takes too much effort to consider all of the implications of their decisions, let alone make the “right” one.

Within the context of this “eco-information overload”, this study also reports on the beginnings of consumer efforts to become more organized as well as consumer efforts at marketplace resistance by using a variety of tools to express their sentiments and to affect change. Increasing numbers of consumers are using social networking tools such Al Gore’s “We Can Solve It” (www.wecansolveit.org) network to influence political agendas, and websites such as EnviroMedia’s Greenwashing Index (www.greenwashingindex.com), which allows consumers to score the credibility of sustainability-related advertising.

NMI’s research findings suggest that sustainability clearly remains on consumers’ radar screen despite the economic downturn, while at the same time, their expectations about green products and information has changed. They are expecting all of the traditional and green benefits in a product/service at the right price, with no sacrifice in convenience. They also want companies to cut through the confusion and clearly spell out the environmental benefits. Confusion over divergent marketplace signals and the tensions among the myriad of “seemingly” green choices represent key areas for consumer research. This presentation offers cutting edge empirical findings that the green “rules of the game” have changed markedly in just the past few years with respect to consumer expectations—results which offer new perspectives on developing relevant, transformative consumer research efforts.

1Natural Marketing Institute (NMI) is a strategic consulting, market research, and business development company specializing in the health, wellness, and sustainable marketplace. NMI is the parent firm for LOHAS, with validated data from 35,000 consumers across 10 countries. For more information on NMI, and LOHAS, see: www.NMIsolutions.com and http://www.nmisolutions.com/r_lohas.html
Our research aims to cast light on strategies of intervention to induce more sustainable household electrical energy consumption. Electrical energy consumption is crucial to the discussion of sustainability because it is foundational to so many other consumption practices that negatively impact the biosphere. We pay special attention to consumer tendencies for evasion and participation in the market system.

Based upon the limited research so far conducted on energy consumption and sustainable consumption generally, our argument is that classic approaches to mass behavioral change, such as pricing and public information linked to social marketing, are not likely to be effective in inducing more sustainable consumption. The reason is that electrical energy consumption is embedded in taken-for-granted dispersed behavioral practices. Practices are normative behavioral predispositions, something like the notion of habitus in Bourdieuan theory. They are comprised of discursive how-to knowledge, tacit know-how, and affective commitments and typically interact with rhetorical practices of representation. In contrast, specialized or “integrative” practices, for example, those associated with brand community participation are constitutive of particular domains or fields of social life and entail specialized behavioral expertise and jargon (Schau, Muniz and Arnould, forthcoming). In sum, practices are performative predispositions in which consumption behaviors are embedded (Schatzki, Cetina and von Savigny 2001; Warde 2005).

Dispersed practices, unlike integrative practices, are inherently more resistant to change because of their deeply tacit, rather than discursive nature. The appropriate performance of gender or composing a “proper” meal are other examples of deeply rooted, distributed practices. However, when distributed practices are challenged by market signals, powerful cultural models may be enlisted to defend them. For example, in North America, distinctive beliefs about Americans’ rights in nature, as well as the ideology of American exceptionalism may drive both resource intensive and luxurious “green” lifestyles that are cloaked in an ideology of frugality (Ludicke, Thompson and Giesler, n.d.). Furthermore, consumers’ experience of macro-social phenomena associated with the global risk society also provides a constraint to behavioral change. Finally, misunderstandings about electric energy and a lack of household level tools for managing energy interact to inhibit the emergence of more sustainable practices. Thus, approaches to behavioral change based on a grasp of macro level social forces, including general sociological drivers of consumer behavior such as postmodern authority, consumer reactivity, social strain, and Commons tragedies, midrange cultural models like American exceptionalism, and dispersed practices associated with conforming, innovative, ritualized, and retreatist, and rebellious responses to innovation in electricity markets, are more likely to provide actionable insight.

Our findings about energy consumption are based on ongoing research conducted in energy markets in the Rocky Mountain west in collaboration with electric energy providers. Data collection and analysis will proceed during the spring and summer. Our research aims to account for 1) the range in response to price and technology innovations that cannot be explained by demographic characteristics alone; 2) to identify the cultural and social drivers of resistance to, and innovation in, demand for innovative energy solutions; and 3) to identify the informational and other tools firms may need to move market segments to more active pro-innovative practices. Our results have implications for so-called green marketing and sustainable consumption generally (Bartiaux 2008; Beck 2006; Maruyama, Nishikido and Ida 2007; Nash 1982; Owens and Drifill 2008; Shove 2003; Warde 2005; Willhite 2005; Wüstenhagen and Bilharz 2006).

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