Self-Construal and Socially Responsible Consumer Behavior.

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We investigate the role of an individual’s dominant self-construal on the shaping of socially responsible consumer behavior. A first study confirmed that a relationship between both exists and is mediated through Perceived Consumer Effectiveness. Ongoing research intends to investigate the intervening process further and test its malleability and potential as a social marketing tool to promote socially conscious consumption.

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Current ecological and economical upheaval demonstrates the need for individuals to rethink their consumption pattern and its impact on their social, ideological and ecological environment. Public and private initiatives undertaken with this goal have been proven to be of limited success. Therefore, further research on the factors associated with socially responsible behavior is warranted. In the current paper, we investigate the potential role of the individual’s self-construal (e.g., Sedikides & Brewer, 2001) on the shaping of ethical consumer behavior (e.g., choosing fair trade and locally produced products, or boycotting firms with poor ethical standards). From a public policy perspective, an interesting aspect of self-construal is that individualism and collectivism represent separate dimensions within the individual (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In other words, a person possesses both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies to a smaller or larger extent (Sinha & Tripathi, 1994). This implies that if, as hypothesized, collective selfconstrual is associated with socially responsible behavior, such behavior can be promoted by emphasizing or activating the collective self.

Self-construal refers to different ways of defining one’s identity. Sedikides and Brewer (2001) distinguish between three types of self-construal: the individual self, the relational self, and the collective self. Defining the self by emphasizing unique traits and independence from others is characteristic for the independent self. The relational and collective self are typically defined in terms of relationships with other individuals and group membership, respectively. At the individual level, multiple tendencies can exist within the same person (Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991). Recent research has demonstrated that socially conscious consumer behavior, like its ecological counterpart, appears to be an expression of prosocial values, like universalism and benevolence (Pepper, Jackson, & Uzzell, 2009). These are the values that are typically associated with collectivism, as opposed to individualism (Triandis, 1995). For example, people with an interdependent self construal (i.e., relational or collective) emphasize group goals over personal goals (e.g., Utz, 2004). Therefore we expect selfconstrual to be related to socially responsible consumer behavior. Rather than to merely ascertain this relationship, we are interested in uncovering the process which connects both constructs. Additionally, we intend to test whether it is possible to temporarily alter one’s dominant selfconstrual through a priming procedure and thus influence the likelihood of engaging in socially responsible consumption.

Using data from a large scale survey we verified the relation between selfconstrual and the tendency to engage in socially responsible consumer behavior. A representative sample of 754 US citizens completed a number of measures related to selfconstrual (Selenta & Lord, 2005), socially responsible consumer behavior (Vitell & Muncy, 2005; Webb, Mohr, & Harris, 2008), and Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE; Roberts, 1996), among others.

As expected, we found a strong relationship between relational and collective selfconstrual on the one hand and ethical consumption on the other. The more the individual describes him/herself in interdependent terms, the more s/he is inclined to make ethical consumer decisions. Relations between ethical consumption and the independent self were smaller or non-significant. More interestingly, we found that PCE mediated the relationship between selfconstrual and ethical consumption using a bootstrapping procedure (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We used this method because it offers a number of advantages compared to other procedures based on multiple regressions (e.g., Baron and Kenny’s procedure). Bootstrapping allows for examining all hypotheses in one statistical model, it does not rely on the assumption of normal distribution, and it provides a direct evaluation of the size and significance of the indirect effect. The analysis

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suggested that the relational self ($Z=8.43, p<0.01$) and the collective self ($Z=8.65, p<0.01$) have an indirect effect on ethical consumption, mediated by PCE. The independent self does not have such an indirect effect ($Z=-0.58, p=0.56$) because there is no relationship between independent selfconstrual and PCE ($r=-0.02, p=0.56$).

Footnote 1

1The results of only one DV are reported on here, due to space restrictions. Results were consistent over all DV’s.

In follow-up research, which is ongoing and will be completed by the date of the conference, we are further testing the role of PCE and other constructs as mediators of the relationship between selfconstrual and ethical consumption experimentally. PCE refers to the fact that people believe, to a larger or smaller extent, that their actions can make a difference on the large scale. Previous research has demonstrated that PCE is the single largest predictor of socially responsible consumer behaviour (Roberts, 1996). We propose that selfconstrual is linked to PCE through projected expectations. Collectivists (as opposed to individualists), who think in terms of collective rationality, expect others to do so as well (Iedema & Poppe, 1995). As a result, collectivists assume that a larger proportion of the population pursues societal interests and therefore it is more likely that the individual (as part of an aggregate) can make a difference. We are testing this hypothesis against a number of alternatives (differences in levels of trust in others, care for others, and a different judgment of the relevance of socially responsible behavior). Additionally, we are testing whether a priming procedure can temporarily override trait selfconstrual and can successfully activate or emphasize one’s relational or collective self. Using behavioral measures, we subsequently test whether such manipulation is successful at influencing an individual’s level of socially responsible consumption. If this is the case, and if a subtle priming procedure is successful at manipulating PCE, this idea could be developed into an interesting social marketing tool.

References


How Self-View Influences Consumers’ Propensity to Adopt New Products: Role of Product Newness and Risk-Relieving Information

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Prior research has shown that certain national cultural traits influence consumers’ propensity to adopt new products. The examination of the relationships between collectivism/individualism and innovation adoption across different nations consistently shows that collectivism is negatively associated with innovation adoption, whereas individualism is positively associated with it (Steenkamp, Hofstede, and Wedel 1999; Tellis, Stremersch, and Yin 2003). However, how situationally activated cultural orientations may affect individuals’ innovation adoption within a nation has not been examined by previous studies.