Green Consumption and Materialism Among Young Consumers

Liyanage Perera, Melbourne University, Australia
Jill Klein, Melbourne University, Australia

We examine the ways in which young consumers understand and engage in green consumption. Photo-elicited depth interviews were conducted. The thematic categories of connection to nature, expression of the self, social costs of green consumption, and empowered consumption were derived. We find that symbolic reproductions of green consumption are similar to that of materialistic consumption among young consumers.

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Liyanage Perera, Melbourne University, Australia  
Jill Klein, Melbourne University, Australia

Green consumption refers to environmentally conscious consumption (Autio et al. 2009; Gillet al. 2005; Stern 2000) and has recently gained significant scholarly attention due to environmental issues such as climate change. Some of these studies are concerned with the relationship between materialism and green consumption and provide mixed findings. Materialism—the excessive regard for worldly possessions, and the accumulation of possessions to gain happiness (Belk 1984; Belk 2001; Kasser et al. 2004; Richins 2004; Richins & Dawson 1992) - is thought to be negatively associated with green consumption (Kilbourne & Pickett 2008). Some argue that green consumers hold postmaterialistic values (Inglehart 1995) which relate to simplistic life styles (Richins & Dawson 1992). There is, however, no consistent findings on the relationship between materialism or postmaterialism and green consumption (i.e., Dietz et al. 1998; Dunlap & York 2008).

**SELF EXPRESSION AND MATERIALISM**

A close scrutiny of studies on materialism shows that consumers express a ‘sense of self’ through consumer materials (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1984; Dolfsma 2004; Giddens 1991; Klein et al. 1995; McCracken 1986; Oyserman 2009). More recent studies also relate green consumption to the formation and expression of consumer identities (Connolly & Prothero 2008; Horton 2003; Soron 2010). Andreou (2010) theoretically argues that materialism is not antithetical to green consumption as happiness from materialistic consumption relies on an emotional, not material level. Furthermore, green consumption conveys a ‘costly signal’ and therefore there is a strong association between high social status and green consumption (Griskevicius et al. 2010).

Building on the above research, we argue materialism may not be negatively related to green consumption. Green consumers expect and enjoy emotional benefits such as self expression and social interaction through their consumption (i.e., Bourdieu & Nice 1984; Holt 1995; McCracken 1986), regardless of whether they are materialists or postmaterialists (Douglas & Isherwood 1996). Thus, the purpose of this scholarship is to explore the emotional benefits or symbolic reproductions of green consumption.

Young consumers have often been criticized for their materialistic consumption (Miles 2000; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2007). Criticisms of young consumers’ understanding of the environmental impacts of their consumption (Autio & Heinonen 2004), or the extent to which they actually engage in green consumption (Hume 2009) coexist in the literature with characterizations of young consumers as socially, culturally and environmentally conscious consumers (Sheahan 2009; Sullivan & Heitmeyer 2008). These contradictory findings suggest the need for further study of young consumers’ green consumption. To this end, we investigate: What does it mean to a young consumer to be a green consumer? And, how does he/she engage in green consumption practices?

**METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION AND ANALYSIS**

Twenty photo-elicited, semi-structured interviews ranging from 1.5-3 hours were conducted with young consumers (aged between 19-25 years) in a large Australian city. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to ensure respondent diversity and gain access to ‘information rich’ cases of youth engaged in environmental groups, activism and consumption practices (Patton 2002). The interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were made. Line-by-line analysis was completed after the first 12 interviews to refine the interview protocol for subsequent cases. After analyzing all the interviews thematic categories (Strauss & Corbin 1990) were derived and tested with respondents in member check interviews.

**FINDINGS: THE MEANING OF GREEN CONSUMPTION**

Green consumption among young consumers is constructed as having an awareness of each stage of production and consumption cycles, and concern about environmental problems such as climate change. Drastically withdrawing from environmentally destructive consumption through adoption of a green lifestyle is considered important. Respondents described green consumption as a conscience-driven consumption practice, which predominantly moves them away from making ‘new’ mass-market commodity purchases and towards alternative consumption practices. In unavoidable purchase occasions, they use mobile phone applications to access information about environmentally unfriendly production and consumption practices. Green consumption with a positive appeal (i.e., means of fun, happiness, social networking and adventure) instead of a negative appeal (i.e., restricted or controlled consumption) is preferred.

1. **Connection to Nature**

Our informants frequently engage in activities related to the natural environment both individually and collectively (i.e., bushwalking, camping). They enjoy the connectedness with the natural environment and strive to participate in sustainable practices that maintain ecologi-
cal balance (i.e., permaculture). Thus, they discursively construct themselves as contributors to ecological balance instead of consumers which usually conveys the meaning of being a passive end user (i.e., Firat & Venkatesh 1995).

2. Expression of the self

Engaging in green consumption helps these young consumers to express their identities as environmentally conscious individuals. Since the meaning of green consumption among them is constructed through awareness of environment-related issues, they try to value being highly informed and share information with other individuals similarly engaging in green consumption. They perceive climate change problems as a massive phenomenon that is somewhat overwhelming. By engaging in green consumption they see themselves as people who deal with this massive phenomenon (Connolly & Prothero 2008; Giddens 1991).–

3. Social costs of green consumption

Informants believe that green consumption is yet to be practiced by mainstream society. They describe difficult experiences in social interactions, in which they are criticized for their green consumption. Criticisms from friends and family lead to feelings of disconnection, and informants navigate a difficult balance between self-expression and accusations that they are preaching to others. While some informants try to avoid associating with non-green consumers, some make compromises to keep up with mainstream consumer expectations (i.e., wearing second-hand t-shirts with a leading brand).

4. Empowered consumption

These consumers try remove themselves from existing market systems through (1) not making new purchases and trying to grow, make or build whatever they need (2) boycotting popular supermarkets, buying from farmers’ markets or engaging in dumpster diving (procuring goods that have been thrown away), (3) staying updated with environmental issues through information technologies and (4) finding alternative exchange methods (i.e., clothing swaps, barter systems among friends). They are also skeptical about green labeled products and perceived them as profit-driven corporate greenwashing. By avoiding greenwashed consumption, these consumers enjoy a greater amount of power and control over their personal consumption in being able to act against environmentally unfavorable marketing practices. However, consistent with previous studies (i.e., Autio, et al. 2009; Cleveland et al. 2005), anxiety about not being able to make a significant positive impact on environmental sustainability is common among these consumers.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We found that the meaning of green consumption among young consumers involves being aware of every aspect of consumption/production cycles through critical information processing. Our interpretive analysis revealed green consumption is practiced as a means of self-expression, identity performance and has positive associations, such as having fun, being happy, social networking and engaging in adventurous activities (i.e., Andreou 2010; Autio, et al. 2009). Enjoying the positive connotations of green consumption, such as discovering alternative means of consumption, taking challenges, enjoying the natural environment, contributing to sustaining the ecological balance and feeling empowered by withdrawing from existing market systems seems to be more prominent for our informants than negative connotations, such as limiting, restricting or controlling consumption.

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**Doers Conform, Perceivers Counteract: The Effect of Synchrony on Uniqueness Seeking**

Xianchi Dai, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China
Ping Dong, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, China

In our daily life, we come across synchronous activities (e.g., chorus, dancing, marching, and so on) very often. Given the ubiquity of these behaviors, it is surprising that little is known in the existing literature how it affects subsequent behavior. In this paper we try to answer the following questions: 1) how does interpersonal synchrony with others affect subsequent uniqueness seeking behavior? 2) Is the effect the same for doers and for perceivers of the synchronous behavior? In answering these questions, we also try to understand the processes underlying these behaviors.

Synchronized behaviors refer to behaviors or actions that are matched in time (Hove and Risen, 2009). Acting in synchrony with others requires individuals to surrender self-centered behaviors and fit into group norm, which in fact imposes a pressure towards people’s behavioral freedom. Thus, after engaging in synchronized behavior, a reactance may occur (Brehm 1966; Brehm and Brehm 1981), which leads to greater uniqueness seeking (i.e., the opposite of conformity). Similarly, watching a group of people’s synchrony behavior may also elicit a feeling of “forced uniformity” from the observers’ perspective. We thus predict the same effect for the perceivers. On the other hand, synchrony has been shown to enhance group cohesion and subsequently strengthens social attachment, fosters cooperation within groups (Haidt 2007; Wiltermuth and Heath 2009; Hove and Risen 2009). As a consequence, those who engage in synchronous behavior would be more likely to conform.

These two forces thus make opposite predictions regarding the effect of synchrony on subsequent preferences. For the doers who engage in interpersonal synchrony, the two forces jointly affect their preferences. We predict that the force that leads to conformity would be stronger and thus dominate the opposite force (i.e., the reactance). Thus, doers would be less uniqueness seeking after engaging in synchronous behavior than after engaging in non-synchronous behavior. The situation is quite different for the perceivers. Perceivers also experience a sense of threat after seeing synchrony, but they do not engage in any action that could increase conformity. That is, for them the psychological reactance would still persist but the action induced conformity would be absent. Thus, perceivers would be more uniqueness seeking after seeing synchronous behavior than after seeing non-synchronous behavior. Furthermore, when the synchronous behavior is perceived to be a result of forced choice rather than free choice, the levels of psychological reactance should be higher. Thus, after forced (versus freely chosen) synchronous behavior, people’s preference for uniqueness would be stronger as a consequence of stronger psychological reactance.

Two studies were conducted to test the predictions and the underlying mechanism that governs the different synchrony effect for doers and perceivers. Study 1 was a 2 (synchrony: synchrony vs. non-synchrony) x 2 (role: doer vs. perceiver) between-subjects design.