Understanding Sustainable Decision-Making of Young Consumers

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The competence of making consumption decisions that take into account environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability is of increasing importance. Using a grounded theory approach, interviews with young consumers were analyzed to clarify how the different and sometimes even conflicting aspects of sustainable decisions influence each other. Preliminary results indicate that young consumers seem to be willing to consume sustainably as long as they do not perceive this as cutting back the standard of living to which they are accustomed. When their attitudes would possibly conflict with their preferred actions, they display different ways of escaping the decision situation.

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enhance the protection of consumers from ads with a greater likelihood of generating false memories as well as prevent misguided campaigns that will harm an organization by leading to customer dissatisfaction.

We predicted there to be an interaction between processing resource availability and an individual’s level of extraversion on the generation of false memories. It was theorized that constraining processing resources during encoding would inhibit participants from mentally rehearsing the semantic associations between provided words. In terms of memory accuracy, we envisioned that this would result in a decided advantage for introverts who we believe normally rely on a rote memorization tactic. Extraverts on the other hand, we believe to be more conversation oriented, thus the connections between words or their semantic associations are focal to extraverts during the encoding of new information. Going under the assumption that introverts and extraverts use unique processes for memorization, we believe that extraverts use a conversation oriented encoding process that facilitates more accurate memory and encoding when processing resources are not constrained. The advantages of this process are however limited by a heavier reliance on cognitive resources and thus vanish when these resources are occupied by other tasks. We predicted that extraverts would show an increase in false memory formation under a cognitive load because they would be forced to rely upon a less resource intensive rote memorization process for which they are neither accustomed to, nor as adept at as introverts.

This experiment was conducted using 126 college undergraduates as participants. Processing resources were constrained by having an experimental group memorize a 7-digit number, while a control group was given a 2-digit number. Afterwards, participants were presented with six lists of words, each of which contained 15 terms that were conceptually linked (Deese, 1959; Roediger & McDermott, 1995). Participants were then asked to freely recall the terms immediately after viewing each individual list. A false memory was recorded if a non-given word was provided during free recall. After the memorization tasks were completed, participants completed the big-five personality inventory (Digman, 1990), which included items measuring extraversion, using a five-point Likert scale.

Analysis of the data revealed a significant 2-way interaction of extraversion and cognitive load on the formation of false memory, but not on correct recall. At a baseline level (i.e., with unconstrained processing resources), introverts generated more false memories than extraverts. When processing resources were constrained, this relationship is inverted, and extraverts generated significantly more false memories. Under a high cognitive load introverts had directionally fewer false memories, thought this reduction was only nearly significant. This suggests that introverts are more skillful rote memorizers, and that forcing them to rely on their natural process may improve memory accuracy in certain situations.

In summary, we believe that introverts tend to rely on rote memorization to encode new information and are thus less likely to mentally rehearse the semantic associations between words. In addition, we believe that extraverts generated significantly more false memories when processing resources were constrained because their natural conversation oriented memorization process, which focuses on the semantic associations between words, is inhibited. Because they are forced to use a process that they are not accustomed to during encoding they have greater difficulty source monitoring during recall. This explains the significant increase in false memory formation that we observe among extraverts in the high load condition. Additional studies are planned to further test this hypothesized psychological process driving the effect.

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Sustainable consumption is already a permanent element in the public debate and will become more important in the future (Sanne 2002), particularly when several exhaustible raw materials run out. Thus the competence of making the ‘right’ sustainable decisions might become one of the most important issues of future consumer generations. The most accepted model for operationalizing sustainability is currently the “triple bottom line”, which postulates that sustainability is based on environmental, social and economic dimensions (Elkington 1998). However, existing empirical studies of sustainable consumption usually focus only one of the three aspects, like environmental aspects (Cornelissen et al. 2008), social aspects (Jackson 2008) or economic aspects (Kumar et al. 2011). When approached this way, it has not yet been sufficiently analyzed how the different and sometimes even conflicting aspects of sustainable decisions influence each other, which makes an integrative approach necessary. This study aims to understand how all three aspects of sustainability are taken into account when judging sustainable consuming decisions.
METHOD

A grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008) was used for analysis and further data collection. Data was collected from high school students aged 16 to 18 from different high schools. This age group is old enough to make their own consumption decisions, but influenced by both their peer group and adults (parents, teacher etc.). These young consumers make interesting interviewees, as the idea of sustainability has been around ever since they have been able to make consumption decisions and they are closest to the future generations, whose rights sustainability acknowledges. The students were interviewed individually with a hypothetical decision situation concerning sustainable consumption and a set of predefined questions. The protagonist in the described situation desires a certain cell phone which to his/her knowledge has been or could have been produced in a problematic way. The problems addressed include child labor, working conditions in Least-Developed Countries, endangered species, and precarious working conditions in industrial nations. The situation was presented by orally explaining the circumstances of the decision situation and handing out cards with information the protagonist was said to possess. The word ‘sustainable’ was neither used in the description of the situation nor in the question, in order to avoid misunderstandings due to another concept of sustainability on the part of the interviewee. After the initial advice to the protagonist, for which the interviewees had to give reasons, they were asked about the assumed perspectives of different stakeholders mentioned on the cards, on hypothetical situations of every consumer acting the same way, and on possible solutions for the addressed problems.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Young consumers present themselves as perfectly willing to take environmental, social and economic issues into account when making consumption decisions as long as they can do so without noticeably modifying their patterns of consumption, especially if they perceive the modification as cutting back the standard of living to which they are accustomed. They display different ways of escaping a decision situation where their attitudes would possibly conflict with their preferred actions, such as reducing the problem on one particular product, breaking the situation down into one or more dilemmas, or arguing that they cannot make a difference anyway.

Although they get the information that every product of a certain kind comes with a particular (environmental, social, or economic) ‘drawback’ in the information cards, they try to solve the problem first by turning to another product of the same kind, thereby ignoring the information given. It seems that they expect to find a solution within consumption rather than in resisting a certain desire for consumption. When they are confronted again with the information that the particular ‘drawback’ exists for every product of that kind, they tend to break the more complex situation down into one or more dilemmas (e.g. protecting the environment vs. securing jobs), which often allows them to use one of the lines of argumentation to justify their preferred actions (e.g. buying a certain product). A young person’s self-efficacy as a consumer in a certain situation might also influence the decision, as consumer behavior will only be adjusted according to what is perceived to be ‘sustainable’ if a person’s actions are expected to make an ever so slight difference.

Furthermore, if sustainable development “seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), a consumer’s idea of man will influence what they think those “needs and aspirations” of the present and future generations are. What young consumers perceived as needs in industrial nations often differed from what they perceived as needs in Least-Developed Countries, e.g. they acknowledged that a consumer in an industrial nation has the need or at least the legitimate aspiration for a new cell phone, whereas they argued that consumers in Least-Developed Countries would not need a cell phone but food, concluding that (from their point of view) selling cell phones in Least-Developed Countries makes no sense.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Since judging the sustainability of consuming decisions is challenging for consumers due to the possibly conflicting nature of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability, education for sustainable development should address this topic. Further data collection, e.g. in form of interviews with consumers who show sustainable consumption patterns in one area of life or the other, shall help to clarify the different levels of competence that consumers show when deciding about sustainable consumption. Based on the results from qualitative research, scales shall be developed to measure the complex competence of sustainable consumption in future analysis.

REFERENCES