The Better of Two 'Goods': Choice Given a Trade-Off Between Pro-Social and Pro-Environmental Performance

Jesse Catlin, California State University, Sacramento, USA
Marcus Phipps, University of Melbourne, Australia
Michael Luchs, The College of William & Mary, USA

Using mixed methods, this research suggests that consumers perceive the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability as psychologically distinct in several meaningful ways. Specifically, we find that consumers perceive environmental (social) sustainability as more psychologically abstract (concrete) and demonstrate how these differences can be used to predict sustainable product choice.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017586/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
The Better of Two ‘Goods’:
Choice Given a Trade-off Between Pro-social and Pro-environmental Performance

Jesse Catlin, California State University, Sacramento, USA
Michael G. Luchs, The College of William & Mary, USA
Marcus Phipps, University of Melbourne, Australia

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Issues ranging from climate change to the fair treatment of workers have fueled the public’s interest in the broad concept of sustainability and have motivated a wide variety of initiatives within industry (McKinsey 2011). Over time, the term sustainability has evolved to encompass many different types of activities. According to a 2005 report from the United Nations, sustainability can be characterized as having “three pillars” related to economic, social and environmental concerns (United Nations 2005), akin to the “triple bottom line” approach of measuring firm performance (Elkington 1994). However, despite the popularity of the term, interpretations of exactly what it means vary amongst consumers (Simpson and Radford 2012). Likewise, academic researchers have operationalized sustainability in a variety of ways, with the most dominant types being environmental (e.g., recycling, pollution) and social (fair trade, supporting communities) (Cotte and Trudel 2009). However, a common trait of most studies is that sustainability is studied along a single dimension (i.e., social or environmental), with little attention to the possible differences between the two forms of sustainability. Our central thesis is that consumer responses to sustainability depend on how sustainability is portrayed. Using a mixed method approach, our research suggests that consumers perceive the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability as psychologically distinct in several important ways. For example, consumers perceive the environmental (social) dimension as more psychologically abstract (concrete). Further, we provide some evidence demonstrating how these insights can be used to better understand sustainability related consumer behaviors.

Given the relative lack of research specifically examining how different forms of sustainability may differ, we conducted an exploratory study to better understand consumer preferences for different forms of sustainability and the reasons underlying these preferences. Participants in a market research survey (n = 422) were asked to choose between two hypothetical chocolate bars that were both promoted as being “sustainable”. Whereas one chocolate bar was described as being “environmentally responsible (e.g., minimizing pollution, efficient energy usage)”, the other was described as “socially responsible (e.g., using fair labor practices, supporting local communities)”. Further, participants were told that these chocolate bars were otherwise identical (i.e., taste and cost would be the same). After indicating their chocolate bar choice, participants were asked to respond to an open-ended prompt explaining why they chose the product they did.

The environmentally responsible option was only marginally more likely to be chosen than the socially responsible option (54.5% vs. 45.5%, respectively; χ2(1) = 3.42, p < .07), indicating a relatively equal distribution of preference across the two sustainable options. The open-ended responses were analyzed using an exploratory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998), with responses split into social and environmental choices and then open coded to identify recurring themes within each category. Following Spiggle’s (1994) framework, emerging themes were continually compared and contrasted to outline the properties of key categories and constructs. Three key themes emerged that distinguished the two forms of sustainability: (1) Emotional versus Rational, (2) Short-term versus Long-term, and (3) Micro versus Macro. Socially responsible sustainability efforts were regarded as more emotional, short-term, and micro in scope. Environmental forms of sustainability were regarded as more rational, long-term, and macro in scope.

Experiencing commonalities across the themes, psychological distance emerged as a potentially useful construct to characterize the differences observed. As a whole, it appears that the social dimension of sustainability may be perceived nearer in terms of psychological distance, whereas the environmental dimension of sustainability may be perceived as more psychologically distant. Theoretical implications are more evident with considering the link between psychological distance and mental construal. Construal Level Theory (Trope and Liberman 2010) proposes that psychological distance is linked to the level of mental construal, with greater distance associated with more abstract, or higher-level thinking. Conversely, shorter psychological distance is characterized by more concrete, or specific-level thinking. Based on evidence showing that consumers respond more favorably to marketing communications that match their construal level (Cheema and Patrick 2008; Jin and He 2012; Lee, Keller, and Sternthal 2010; Martin, Gnoth, and Strong 2009), we anticipated that abstract construers will prefer products that highlight more psychologically distant forms of sustainability (i.e., environmental responsibility), while concrete construers will prefer products that highlight forms of sustainability that are closer in psychological distance (i.e., social responsibility).

The objective of study 2 was to examine the possibility that differences in consumers’ mindsets with respect to construal level could predict product choice given differences in the type of sustainability. Fifty-eight undergraduate students were shown the same product choice scenario as in study 1, with the addition of a third option to choose neither product. After making a choice, participants completed items from the Behavior Identification Form (BIF) as adapted by Liberman and Trope (1998). Of the fifty-four participants who did not opt out of the choice, there was no significant difference between the number choosing the environmental (n = 25) and social (n = 29) options (χ2(1) = .30, NS). As expected, however, choice did depend upon participants’ chronic construal level, with choice likelihood of an environmentally (socially) responsible product increasing as construal becomes higher level more abstract (lower level more concrete) (χ2 (1) = 4.09, p < .05).

This research demonstrates that the most frequently addressed dimensions of sustainability—social and environmental—differ in theoretically meaningful ways. Overall, we found that these dimensions differ with respect to perceived psychological distance and that this difference can be used to predict sustainability related consumer behaviors. More specifically, we found that the social dimension is perceived as more psychologically proximal (concrete), with a more immediate and direct impact on people locally. Conversely, the environmental dimension was characterized as being more psychologically distant (abstract), with more of a long-term impact on the planet as a whole. Further, we demonstrated that an individual difference, chronic construal level, can be useful in predicting product choice in this context, with higher (lower) construal predicting the choice of environmentally (socially) responsible products.

* This project was conceived at the Third Conference on Transformative Consumer Research, June 24-26, 2011, Baylor University.
REFERENCES