Consumer Proclivity For Sustainable Consumption: a Social Normative Approach
Peter Voyer, University of Windsor, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Some consumers deliberately reject normative sustainable consumption behaviors, while simultaneously engaging in others that are not normative. To understand this paradox a causal model is developed and three studies are used to test it. Results suggest that a personality trait drives particular consumers to reject a behavior if it is perceived as normative.

INTRODUCTION

Motivated by the prevailing need to understand CB as it relates to sustainability (Thøgersen and Schrader 2012), this paper addresses the research question: why do some consumers purposefully avoid particular sustainable consumption behaviors (SCBs), even in the face of social pressure to comply, while at the same time engaging in other SCBs where no such social pressure exists? In pursuing this paradoxical question, I consider consumer personality coupled with a social normative approach.

Sustainability is critical. The future well-being of humankind depends on how resources are consumed. It is estimated that by 2030, 60% of the world’s population will occupy the middle class as 150 million consumers enter this class yearly; accordingly, energy demand will increase by 40%, and the demand for water will surpass supply by 40% (WEF 2013). “We are living as if we have an extra planet at our disposal … using 50% more resources than the Earth can provide … by 2030, even two planets will not be enough” (WWF 2012, 1). The “business as usual” paradigm cannot continue. To avoid global disaster, ballooning consumption must be restrained.

As suggested in the foregoing paragraph, theoretical understanding of the importance of sustainability is known, however, there exists a gap between this knowledge and action directed at implementable solutions (Thøgersen 2005; Thøgersen and Schrader 2012). A spate of well-intentioned major global policy initiatives has done little to reduce worldwide consumption (Prothero et al. 2011). The seminal UN Brundtland Commission’s 1987 Report, the 2000 UN Millennium Summit, the 2005 UN World Summit, and others, have articulated the significance of protecting resources, however, their recommendations were characterized by implementability difficulties, resulting in no real tangible outcomes that have re-oriented the current global path of non-sustainability.

In this paper, I move the focus from the esoteric and conceptual, to the practical and operational. Using the individual consumer as the unit of analysis, I seek to understand the interplay between social normative influences and consumers’ personalities that impact SCB. The extant consumer-oriented literature on sustainable consumption (SC) gives insufficient attention to the role of social influence. “Social influence is often poorly theorized or simply absent from behavioral models and research” (Axsen and Kurani 2012, 312). It is here that I seek to make a contribution and support the ACR’s mission to “facilitate the exchange of scholarly information among members of academia, industry, and government worldwide.”

This research is positioned within the limited CB social influence literature on SC and specifically, the Transformative Consumer Research movement, by providing research that, “benefits consumer welfare and quality of life for all beings affected by consumption across the world” (ACR Website). Adopting a multi-disciplinary perspective, this research is informed by literatures from marketing, CB, psychology, sociology, and policy works from the UN, government, and NGOs. In the following sections I overview salient literature and develop a model that addresses the research question. After testing the model, findings are presented, followed by a general discussion.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

What we know about sustainability has originated from policy makers (governments and NGOs), and academics. Policy makers have generated wide-ranging policies intended to advance sustainability, but these have lacked operationalization. Resultantly, consumers have been reluctant to accept these efforts and modify their consumption behavior (OECD 2008). In contrast, academics have focused on issues related to implementability (Schrader and Thøgersen 2011). Specifically, a pervasive concern has been the divergence between knowledge and real action needed to advance SC, and the need to understand the reasons for this gap (Thøgersen and Schrader 2012). The notion of sustainability focuses on adopting a long-term perspective of natural resource management with environmental protectionism suggesting that via careful management, humankind can avoid resource-depletion, making these resources available for future generations (Thøgersen 2005). Sustainability has been approached along two sides of an equation: SC (how products are demanded/consumed), and sustainable production (how products are produced to fulfill demand).

Conceptualizations of SC (demand side) have evolved over time with governments/NGOs driving world thinking. Most approaches have emphasized the need for consumers to behave in ways that can enhance the future well-being of humankind by minimizing the impact on the earth’s resources/environment. A pragmatic definition states that SC is, “the use of goods and services required to meet basic needs and improve quality of life without placing at risk the needs of future generations. This includes the selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service” (Government of Canada 2013). This behaviorally-focused approach is adopted here, and can be operationalized to reflect SCBs: recycling, self-sufficiency, and closeness to nature. These will be discussed later.

The CB literature has studied sustainability in relation to: ethnicity and skepticism (Luchs et al. 2010); congruency of political ideology and persuasive appeals (Kidwell et al. 2013); and product distortion and recycling (Trudel and Argo 2013). Although important, little research has involved social influence with SC (Axsen and Kurani 2012). Often unrecognized, social influence is a formidable determinant of behavior (Liu et al. 2012).

Central to social influence is the distinction between normative and informational influence. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) provided an enduring explanation of each concept where normative influence relates to the “influence to conform with the positive expectations of another” (629), while informational influence is the “influence to accept information obtained from another as evidence about reality” (629) – people try to gain social approval and liking, and avoid negative outcomes (rejection/embarrassment). Also, they rely on others’ actions and attitudes as a source of information about the nature of reality (Goldstein et al. 2008; Cialdini 2001). Other’s expectations (norms) are important and are the basis of social functioning.

Norms are rules that stipulate how members of a group are expected to behave under given circumstances, and “may be thought of as legitimate, socially shared guidelines to the accepted and expected patterns of conduct” (Birenbaum and Sagarrin 1976, 11). Essential
for social life (Blau 1964), norms are directed at certain behaviors called social actions (Coleman 1990), like recycling. Much social behavior is driven by social norms. Here, society is defined as, “any fairly large group of people who share a common culture, think of themselves as having inherited a common set of historical traditions, interact with other group members frequently, and see themselves as being associated with a particular geographic area” (Teevan and Hewitt 1995, 26).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The model (fig. 1) explains why some consumers intentionally avoid particular SCBs while engaging in others. Central to the model is the role played by the personality trait, consumer propensity to deviate (CPD). Psychological reactance is modeled as an antecedent to CPD, while as a consequent effect, SCB is captured by measuring representative behaviors: recycling, self-sufficiency, and closeness to nature.

CONSUMER PERSONALITY: CONSUMER PROPENSITY TO DEVIATE (CPD)

Consideration of personality in SC research has been limited. However, personality traits can predict SCBs. Luchs and Mooradian (2012) found strong evidence to support the importance of personality when they modeled the agreeableness trait as a mediator between gender and SCB. This reinforced related research that showed how

FIGURE 1

RESULTS OF PATH ANALYSES (STUDY 3)

**Psychological Antecedents** → **Behavioral Outcomes**

- **Recycle**
- **Self-Sufficiency**
- **Closeness to Nature**

Notes:

a. All paths are significant where H1: p < .001; H2: p < .01; H3: p < .10; and H4: p < .05.
b. Path loadings are indicated and t-values are in parentheses.
c. Reactance was measured using an 11-item, four-factor version of the Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (Hong and Faedda 1996): emotional response toward restricted choice (ER); reactance to compliance (RC); resisting influence from others (RI); and reactance toward advice and recommendations (RA).
d. CFA Fit Indices (CPD alone): $\chi^2 = 30.98$, (d.f. = 14, p = .01), $\chi^2$/d.f. = 2.21, GFI = .95, RNI = .97, CFI = .97, and RMSEA = .08
e. CFA Fit Indices (Reactance alone): $\chi^2 = 36.71$, (d.f. = 29, p = .15), $\chi^2$/d.f. = 1.27, GFI = .96, RNI = .97, CFI = .97, and RMSEA = .04
f. CFA Fit Indices (Recycle, Self-Sufficiency, Closeness-to-Nature alone): $\chi^2 = 30.35$, (d.f. = 24, p = .17), $\chi^2$/d.f. = 1.27, GFI = .96, RNI = .98, CFI = .98, and RMSEA = .04
g. CFA Fit Indices for the Model: $\chi^2 = 388.76$, (d.f. = 291, p < .001), $\chi^2$/d.f. = 1.34, GFI = .85, CFI = .93, and RMSEA = .05
h. Recycling Scale Items: (1) newspapers; (2) glass jars/bottles; and (3) cans.
i. Self-sufficiency Scale Items: (1) family/friends change oil in car; (2) gotten skills to increase self-reliance (e.g., carpentry, car repair, or plumbing); and (3) exchanged goods/services in lieu of payment with money.
j. Closeness to Nature Scale Items: (1) intentionally avoid meat; (2) contribute to ecologically oriented organizations; and (3) grow own vegetables.
various personality traits can predict behavioral outcomes (Hirsh 2010; Hirsh and Dolderman 2007). A personality trait is a persistent, identifiable characteristic that defines a person (Solomon et al. 2014). This is consistent with Bandura’s (1986) approach emphasizing the personality-behavior link and states that it is, “a broad enduring disposition to behave in certain ways” (5).

As personality trait, CPD explains why some consumers are more likely than others to engage in norm-violating behavior and is formally defined as, “the inclination or tendency for consumers to willfully contravene consumption norms as defined by members of [their society]” (Voyer 2014, 723). A key feature is the deliberate/intentional norm-violation aspect (i.e., to be “anti”), which conceptually stands in contrast to a consumer’s desire to be “different.” CPD varies across all consumers to a greater or lesser extent. Like Midgley and Dowling’s (1978) innovativeness construct, CPD is not defined in terms of an actual behavior, but rather an individual’s propensity. Although a propensity cannot be acted upon without an opportunity, it’s omnipresent.

Psychological Reactance

Reactance suggests that when people feel that their freedom of choice is threatened in some way, they will become impelled to assert what is being taken away (Brehm 1966). Little CB research has been devoted to this construct apart from a few studies (e.g., Clee and Wicklund 1980; Kivetz 2005; Liu et al. 2012). Some consumers place great importance on (perceived) freedom to dispose of products in a manner of their choosing and find government regulations that mandate recycling provocative. For example, Seattle (USA) and Gatineau (Canada) have recently employed “garbage police” to randomly inspect residents’ garbage bags for (prohibited) recyclables; those consumers who are found guilty face fines. Such campaigns might trigger defiant behavior and negate the desired outcomes (Clee and Wicklund 1980). Reactance is related to consumers’ responses against normative pressure; some may respond aggressively, others with self-presentation methods using public image, yet others may try to facilitate a sense of control and establish an illusion of power (Gilbert et al. 1988).

Psychological reactance can be modeled (and measured) as a personality trait, and is positively related to other personality variables such as: internal locus of control, self-esteem, and others (Hong and Faedda 1996). Brehm (1966) suggested that any message (or ad) aimed at trying to change attitude or behavior could be construed as a threat to freedom. When faced with this perception, some consumers will violate norms and react by, “producing even more of the undesired behaviors as a means of demonstrating choice” (Burgoon et al. 2002, 215)—faced with a prescriptive norm, some consumers will embrace the (“prohibited”) behavior and engage in it (Brehm 1966); the behavioral outcome (a boomerang effect) will be contrary to the norm. A consumer who is likely to be highly reactionary would also be more inclined to breach norms. I hypothesize that reactance will be positively related to CPD:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the consumer’s psychological reactance, the greater the CPD.

Sustainable Consumption (SC)

The OECD (2008) maintains that SC includes: recycling, efficiency in the consumption of resources in the home, minimalization of waste, and environmentally sound purchasing practices of households. This reinforces the aforementioned definition of SC, operationalized to include measures for recycling, self-sufficiency and closeness to nature. Closely related to SC, the concept of voluntary simplicity is about reducing consumption (Etzioni 1998; Prothero et al. 2011). Voluntary simplifiers are consumers “who are resisting high consumption lifestyles and who are seeking, in various ways, a lower consumption” (Alexander and Usher 2012, 66 – 67). The same authors directly link voluntary simplicity to SC and state, “human beings need to consume differently and produce commodities more efficiently” (67). Further, they emphasize that voluntary simplicity is a coherent and necessary behavioral solution needed for SC.

Voluntary simplicity is conceptualized as the degree to which an individual selects a lifestyle intended to maximize his/her control over daily activities, and to minimize his/her consumption and dependency (Leonard-Barton 1981). Leonard-Barton (1981) operationalized this concept by advancing several behavioral manifestations including: recycling; self-sufficiency; and closeness to nature.

Recycling of Resources. Recycling (paper, bottles, cans, etc.) is now normative in developed nations (OECD 2008). Enhanced by government programs (e.g., home “blue boxes,” public recycling bins), this expectation is a dominant consumption norm. The amount of recycled material can be increased through activation of norms (Schultz 1999). Given recycling’s normative aspect, I hypothesize an inverse relationship with CPD:

Hypothesis 2: The greater a consumer’s CPD, the lesser the likelihood of that consumer will engage in recycling behavior.

Self-sufficiency proposes that consumers rely more on themselves to do various tasks (e.g., repair one’s own vehicle, develop skills like carpentry/plumbing to enhance self-reliance, or engage in barter) (Leonard-Barton 1981). Unlike recycling, self-sufficiency is not normative, especially in developed nations. For busy consumers, time is at a premium; they purchase convenience goods, shop at retailers that offer convenience, and seek professional repair services. Lifestyles characterized by time scarcity/constraints, coupled with technological complexities, drive consumers to greater dependence on products and amenities. Social pressures compel consumers to adopt a work-and-spend lifestyle while simultaneously feeling the “conditions of urban living or the effects of pervasive marketing” (Sanne 2002, 273). I hypothesize that the more a consumer becomes self-sufficient, the more he/she digresses from social expectations of convenience-oriented consumption (lessened self-sufficiency):

Hypothesis 3: The greater a consumer’s CPD, the greater the likelihood of that the consumer will pursue self-sufficiency behaviors.

Closeness to Nature captures the essence of ecological awareness to include growing one’s own food, vegetarianism, and/or contributing to ecologically-oriented organizations (Leonard-Barton 1981). As the world’s population increases, food production and consumption become critical as does the interdependency between people and resources. Driven by consumer demand for inexpensive and plentiful food, large-scale commercial agricultural operations have become prevalent, and have led to the steady demise of smaller, more ecologically-friendly family farms. Consumers have not modified food demand based on what the land can more efficiently produce. Due to a socially-expected desire to enhance convenience, consumers retreat from nature (e.g., purchasing food items vs. growing them). Closeness to nature is not socially normative and therefore:
Hypothesis 4: The greater a consumer’s CPD, the greater the likelihood of that the consumer will pursue behaviors oriented to enhancing his/her closeness to nature.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHOD, AND RESULTS
Central to the model is the notion of deliberate norm-violation (captured by CPD). Three studies were used to comprehensively assess the model. Study 1 was exploratory and sought to understand consumers’ beliefs related to norm-violation. To evaluate construct validity, study 2 focused on the psychometric behavior of the focal construct, CPD, by examining it in relation to conceptually related constructs. Lastly, study 3 served to ultimately test the hypotheses.

TABLE 1: INTERNAL CONSISTENCY AND CORRELATIONS (STUDIES 2 & 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study 2</th>
<th>Internal Consistency</th>
<th>Correlations</th>
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<td>Comp. α</td>
<td>Coef. α</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPD</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUCP</td>
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<td>Inf-N</td>
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<td>Inf-I</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<th>Study 3</th>
<th>Internal Consistency</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Reactance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Sufficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Closeness to Nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATSCI</td>
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<td>SDB</td>
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<td>Income</td>
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Notes: Correlations are Pearson Correlations. All correlations are significant at the .01 or .001 levels (2-tailed), except where noted by * (p < .10) or N (not significant). Diagonal entries are mean values, and standard deviations (in parentheses).

* CFA Fit Indices (CPD alone): χ² of 72.09 (d.f. = 14, p < .001), GFI = .95, RNI = .96, CFI = .96, and RMSEA = .10
* CFA Fit Indices (CPD & CNS): χ² = 265.07, (d.f. = 119, p < .001), GFI = .95, RNI = .95, CFI = .95, and RMSEA = .07
* CFA Fit Indices (CPD & DUCP): χ² = 214.46, (d.f. = 119, p < .001), GFI = .95, RNI = .95, CFI = .95, and RMSEA = .06
* CFA Fit Indices (CPD, Inf-N, & Inf-I): χ² = 464.60, (d.f. = 149, p < .001), GFI = .95, RNI = .95, CFI = .95, and RMSEA = .07
* Personal Income; This value indicates annual mean income is < $40K
with rule-breaking as those who tend to deliberately breach norms (expectations/rules). Importantly, the recycling rule was the most frequently stated social norm. Thus, understanding of the domain was enhanced, and results suggested that the consuming public’s conception of deliberate norm-violation was in accord with mine.

**Study 2 – Validity**

The goals of study 2 were to assess construct validity and to ensure that CPD reflected the key notion of intentional norm-violation (“anti”) vs. a desire to be unique/innovative (“different”). Web-based survey methodology was used. By clicking a URL contained in an invitational email, respondents entered a commercial survey hosting site. Respondents were undergraduates from a large N.A. university (N = 395, M_{age} = 19.0, SD_{age} = 4.5, Female = 54%).

**Measures and Predictions.** The questionnaire consisted of: the CPD scale; three validity measures; and a demographics section. All scales’ items were seven-point. CPD was measured using a seven-item scale (Voyer 2014). To evaluate CPD’s dissimilarity with desire to be “different,” the Consumer Novelty Seeking (CNS) scale, measuring the desire for consumers to seek out new product information, was included (Manning et al. 1995). The Desire for Unique Consumer Products (DUCP) scale, measuring the extent to which consumers hold a personal goal of acquiring products that few others possess, was included (Lynn and Harris 1997).

**Consumer Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence** was included. This two-dimensional scale [normative influences (Inf-N), and informational influences (Inf-I)] captures the need to identify with others (or enhance one’s image) by being mindful of others’ expectations (Inf-N), or by seeking information from others (Inf-I) (Bearden et al. 1989). These measures are conceptually related to, but distinct from, CPD. I expected all measures to be correlated positively and weakly to CPD.

**CFA Results.** Using AMOS, CFA on CPD alone indicated: acceptable fit (table 1, note a); appropriate item loadings (.70 to .79); and suitable squared multiple correlations (.49 to .62). CFAs that modeled CPD with one of the three validity measures individually indicated acceptable fit (table 1, notes b, c, d). Results confirmed CPD’s unidimensionality and satisfactorily performing items.

**Analyses.** CPD’s interitem correlations were acceptable (.45 to .64) as were corrected item-to-total correlations (.66 to .75). Internal consistency measures for CPD were satisfactory (table 1). Convergent validity was assessed; in CFAs conducted with CPD and validity measures, t-values of all CPD items exceeded 15.09 (p < .001) suggesting CPD’s convergent validity (Segars 1994). Two tests for discriminant validity were performed. Firstly, variances ranged from .01 to .40 (from table 1, by squaring the correlations), and were substantially less than the constructs’ AVE values, indicating adequate discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Secondly, in principal components analysis of a five-construct model (CPD, CNS, DUCP, Inf-N and Inf-I), CPD demonstrated that none of its items loaded more heavily on another construct than on itself, again, reinforcing discriminant validity.

**Construct Validity: Assessment of Predictions.** Predicted correlations (CPD and validity measures) were supported (table 1), suggesting CPD’s construct validity. The low mean CPD score (1.72) was not surprising since most consumers are not inclined to breach norms. CFAs (table 1, notes a, b, c, d) suggest that validity measures were seen by respondents as distinct from CPD.

**Study 3 – Assessing the Model**

The aim of study 3 was to assess the model and its hypotheses. Web-based survey methodology (per study 2) was used. Respondents were students (undergraduate, graduate, part- and full-time) at a small N.A. college (N = 159, M_{age} = 26.8, SD_{age} = 9.0, Female = 25.8%).

**Measures and Predictions.** The survey included measures for: reactance, CPD, three behavioral measures for SC, two validity measures, and a demographics section. Reactance was measured using the 11-item, seven-point, Hong Reactance Scale (fig. 1, note c). CPD was measured using Voyer’s (2014) scale. SC was captured using three behavioral measures: recycling; self-sufficiency; and closeness to nature (each reflected by three-item, five-point, Likert-type statements, fig. 1, notes h, i, j) drawn from Leonard-Barton’s (1981) multi-dimensional Voluntary Simplicity Scale. Additionally, the conceptually related measure, *Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI)* (Lennox and Wolfe 1984), was included as a validity measure to assess its distinctiveness from CPD. It captures the extent to which one is aware of, and concerned about, the reactions of others to one’s own behavior. Both constructs (CPD and ATSCI) suggest that the consumer engages in comparison: CPD to norms, and ATSCI to others’ reactions. I predicted the correlation between them to be low or nonsignificant. Also, included as a validity measure, was *Social Desirability Bias (SDB)*, assessed using a 10-item version of the Marlowe-Crowne scale (Strahan and Gerbasi 1972). I predicted SDB’s correlation with CPD would be low or nonsignificant.

**Results.** Initial analyses focused on examining measures’ factor structure and psychometric performance of items. CFAs were conducted on each measure individually; fit indices were found to be acceptable (fig. 1, notes d, e, f). Factors’ standardized item loadings were acceptable (all λ > .7), as were internal consistency measures (table 1). All hypotheses and predictions were supported as evidenced by path analyses in fig. 1, and correlations in table 1, respectively. Of note, the correlation between SDB and CPD was not significant and suggested that CPD did not likely suffer from this bias (table 1). All path loadings (fig. 1) were significant. The CFA on the complete model indicated acceptable data fit (fig. 1, note g).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS**

Paradoxically, there is a disparity between some consumers’ positive attitudes towards sustainability and their actual unsustainable behaviors (Prothro et al. 2011). This research helps to explain why this difference occurs. The model highlights the important role played by personality and norms in determining behavior. Findings suggest that when particular SCBs are perceived as socially normative, such as recycling, high-CPD consumers will deliberately breach that behavioral norm and thwart the behavior; however, when other SCBs are not seen as socially normative, as with self-sufficiency and closeness to nature, the same consumers will pursue them.

Several contributions have been made to CB theory. Understanding of the role of personality in relation to normative influence was broadened. The persuasion (attitude change) literature was enhanced by extending the prominent elaboration likelihood theory (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) – norms could act as peripheral cues in terms of their impact on various consumers’ personality-driven tendencies to adhere (or not) to the norms. For example, choosing to toss a used plastic bottle into either a recycling container or a garbage container is for most consumers a trivial decision and thus, would likely be processed peripherally. Also, by focusing on personality, I reinforce and extend Cialdini’s (2001a; 2001b) work on social and interpersonal influence where he proposed persuasion principles (social validation, consistency, etc.).

Policy makers can leverage these findings to formulate communication plans designed to boost SCB. Implementability is essen-
tial. Action-focused plans and ads must center on CB by recognizing varying consumer personalities. Ads should be designed to shape individuals’ perceptions of particular SCBs by controlling the manner in which the desired SCB is presented to consumers – market segmentation can help along with some principles of social influence extended by the current research. For a “low-CPD” target segment, the “if everyone is doing it, it must be right and so, you should do it too” approach could be employed – consistent with the principle of social consensus (Cialdini 2001b; Goldstein et al. 2008). For a “high-CPD” target segment, presenting the message as being normative should be avoided – ads could present the SCB as a suggestion, or as being “cool” and “unique” in order to reduce normative influence. Ultimately, academics, managers, and policy makers must work in a coordinated and synergistic fashion if SC is to be realized in practice.

Limitations. Rational choice has been assumed to prevail. No detailed consideration of potential biological, political and economic factors has been made. Research involving norms can spur concerns such as: (1) how many members are required for norm-formation; (2) what do people have in mind when judging norms; and (3) what the person evaluating the behavior regards as good/bad (Gibbs 1995).

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