The Slippery Slope of Green Consumption: the Nonlinear Effects of Social Class

Li YAN, Monash University, Australia
Hean Tat Keh, Monash University, Australia
Jiemiao Chen, Monash University, Australia

This research reveals that social class has a nonlinear (inverted U-shaped) effect on green consumption; positively mediated by social acceptance at the lower level of social class and negatively mediated by essentialist belief at the higher level. These effects are moderated by consumers’ belief in a just world.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2410420/volumes/v46/NA-46

[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 Slippery Slope of Green Consumption: The Nonlinear Effects of Social Class
Li Yan, Monash University, Australia
Hean Tat Keh, Monash University, Australia
Jiemiao Chen, Monash University, Australia

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
As environmental issues grow increasingly acute, more research is needed to understand the impact of individuals’ behaviors on sustainability. Given that green consumption can reflect status differentiation (Griskevicius et al. 2010), and social class serves as a dimension of consumer distinctiveness (Grier and Deshpandé 2001), we propose that social class, as a means of consumer differentiation, will influence their propensity for green consumption.

Social class is defined as a combination of individuals’ material resources (i.e., income, education, and job status), and self-perceptions of their own rank in the society vis-à-vis others (Kraus et al. 2012). It has profound psychological and cultural effect on individuals’ feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (Grossmann and Huynh 2013). However, scant research has examined how social class shapes consumer behaviors (Shavitt et al. 2016; Yoon and Kim 2018).

The present research proposes a nonlinear (i.e., inverted U-shaped) effect of social class on green consumption, such that individuals at the middle position of the class continuum show greater green propensity than those at the lower or upper position (H1). Although striving for a higher social rank is a fundamental motive for individuals, the means for rank advancement differ (Belmi and Laurin 2016). Specifically, lower-class individuals believe that they need to make prosocial contributions to advance their status, and are thus driven by social acceptance for green consumption (H2a). However, as the intrinsic benefits associated with social hierarchy grow exponentially, individuals proximal to the top attach more importance to justifying their advantaged standing using ideological means such as essentialism. Essentialism refers to the belief that social class category is predetermined and immutable, and such ideology helps to justify disparities in social rank (Kraus and Keilner 2013). Thus, we propose that essentialism would demotivate individuals from engaging in green consumption (H2b). Finally, we propose that individuals’ belief in a just world (BJW) moderates the nonlinear effect of social class on green consumption (H3). BJW refers to the belief that the world is a just place where people deserve what they get and get what they deserve (Lerner 1980). We suggest that high BJW promotes individuals’ acquiescence of perceived differences in social class, which attenuates the nonlinear effects of social class difference on green consumption.

We tested our hypotheses in four experiments. Experiment 1 examined the main effect of social class (H1). Experiment 2 used a 3 (primed social class: lower vs. middle vs. upper) × 2 (product greenness: green vs. regular) between-participants design. A 3 × 2 ANOVA revealed only a significant interaction effect of social class and product greenness (p < .05). Decomposing the interaction showed that social class significantly influenced purchase intentions for the green product (p < .05), but not for the regular product (p > .20). Importantly, polynomial contrast showed a significant quadratic effect of social class on purchase intention for the green product (p < .001), but no linear effect (p > .50). Specifically, participants in middle-class condition showed higher purchase intention for the green product than those in the lower-class (p < .05) and upper-class conditions (p < .05). In contrast, the three class conditions were not significantly different in purchase intentions for the regular product (all ps > .14). Thus, H1 was supported. For all studies, controlling for the objective social class indicators (i.e., income, education) and other covariates (e.g., political ideology, religiosity, and ethnicity) did not change the results.

Experiment 2 provided process evidence for the nonlinear mediation effect of social acceptance at the lower level of social class (H2a). It used a one factor (product greenness: regular vs. green) between-participants design. Social class was measured as a continuous variable. A moderated hierarchical regression analysis showed a significant and negative quadratic-by-linear effect of SC × product greenness on purchase intention (β = -.72, p < .05) after controlling for the effects of the linear terms and covariates. Decomposing the quadratic-by-linear interaction showed that the nonlinear effect of social class was significant and negative for the green product (β = -.37, p < .01), but not significant for the regular product (p > .50). MEDCURVE analysis (Hayes and Preacher 2010) revealed a significant and negative effect of the quadratic term (SC²) on social acceptance (b = -.24, p < .05), which was positively related to purchase intention (b = .25, p < .01). Analyses of the instantaneous indirect effect (0) at lower (-1 SD) and higher (+1 SD) levels of social class revealed that social acceptance could explain the positive effect at the lower level of social class (0 = .21, 95% CI = .057, .476), but not at the higher level of social class (95% CI = -.092, .112), which supported H2a.

Experiment 3 examined the mediating effect of essentialism at the higher level of social class (H2b). It used a one factor (product greenness: regular vs. green) within-participant design. Social class was measured as a continuous variable using subjective SES. Regression with both linear and quadratic terms (SES and SES²) in the equation showed a significant and negative effect of SES² on preference for green product (SES: β = .08, p > .14, SES²: β = -.14, p < .05). MEDCURVE analysis revealed a significant and positive effect of SES² on essentialism (b = .04, p < .05), which was negatively related to preference for the green product (b = -.23, p < .05). Analyses of the instantaneous indirect effect showed that essentialism could explain the negative effect at the higher level of social class (0 = -.05, 95% CI = -.128, -.008), but not at the lower level of social class (95% CI = -.170, .064), supporting H2b.

Experiment 4 tested the overall model and the moderating effect of BJW using a similar design as experiment 3. Moderated regression results revealed a significant and negative effect of SES² (β = -.20, p < .01), and a significant and positive quadratic-by-linear effect of SES² × BJW on preference for the green product (β = .20, p < .05). Further analysis of the quadratic-by-linear interaction indicated that the effect of SES² was significant at low BJW (b = -.19, p < .001), but not at high BJW (p > .50). Thus, H1 and H3 were supported. MEDCURVE analyses showed that social acceptance could explain the positive effect at the lower level of social class (0 = .04, 95% CI = .000, .111) while essentialism could explain the negative effect at the higher level of social class (0 = -.05, 95% CI = -.104, -.001), supporting H2a and H2b.

Taken together, four experiments using varying products and designs provided consistent evidence for the nonlinear effect of social class on green consumption, as explained by social acceptance and essentialism, and moderated by BJW. This curvilinear result can help reconcile conflicting findings in the literature based on the two-level approach. In particular, it addresses the middle class, an under-theorized social category, which is a powerful category for self-iden-
tification and plays an important role in economic growth, political transformation, and social restructuring in many societies. In sum, our findings contribute to the literature on consumer differentiation, social class and sustainable consumption, as well as have important practical implications.

REFERENCES