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Large UK retailers' initiatives to reduce consumers' emissions: a systematic assessment

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ABSTRACT

In the interest of climate change mitigation, policy makers, businesses and non-governmental organisations have devised initiatives designed to reduce in-use emissions whilst, at the same time, the number of energy-consuming products in homes, and household energy consumption, is increasing. Retailers are important because they are at the interface between manufacturers of products and consumers and they supply the vast majority of consumer goods in developed countries like the UK, including energy using products. Large retailers have a consistent history of corporate responsibility reporting and have included plans and actions to influence consumer emissions within them.

This paper adapts two frameworks to use them for systematically assessing large retailers' initiatives aimed at reducing consumers' emissions. The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) is adapted and used to analyse the strategic scope and coherence of these initiatives in relation to the businesses' sustainability strategies. The ISM 'Individual Social Material' framework is adapted and used to analyse how consumer behaviour change mechanisms are framed by retailers. These frameworks are used to analyse eighteen initiatives designed to reduce consumer emissions from eight of the largest UK retail businesses, identified from publicly available data.

The results of the eighteen initiatives analysed show that the vast majority were not well planned nor were they strategically coherent. Secondly, most of these specific initiatives relied solely on providing information to consumers and thus deployed a rather narrow range of consumer behaviour change mechanisms. The research concludes that leaders of retail businesses and policy makers could use the FSSD to ensure processes, actions and measurements are comprehensive and integrated, in order to increase the materiality and impact of their initiatives to reduce consumer emissions in use. Furthermore, retailers could benefit from exploring different models of behaviour change from the ISM framework in order to access a wider set of tools for transformative system change.

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1. Introduction

Businesses shape how consumers consume. Companies that serve consumers directly have become adept at presenting themselves as powerful and trustworthy actors for the good of the environment. Yet this presentation may not be reflected in what they do and how they organise their plans for successful outcomes. This paper takes one aspect of consumption, carbon emissions at home, and one business sector, retailers, and examines initiatives, between 2007 and 2013, declared by the largest companies operating in the UK. It seeks to identify possible opportunities for retailers to increase the success of their initiatives, through both improving planning coherence and widening their perspectives on mechanisms for consumer behaviour change. It uses two complementary systematic frameworks, and is based on retailers' own reporting.

1.1. Retailers and consumer behaviour at home

Governments have declared that individual citizens will have to cut their own greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions if global emissions reduction targets are to be achieved (Jackson, 2009; OECD, 2011). Policy makers, businesses and non-governmental organisations have attempted to design initiatives to reduce in-use emissions. Yet in developed markets, such as the UK, people are using an increasing number of energy-consuming products in their homes

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(Owen, 2012) and GHG emissions arising from domestic product use continue to rise (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2014); total amount of electricity consumption by household domestic appliances between 1970 and 2013 grew by around 1.7 per cent per year. Consumer electronics was the largest consuming category in 2013, followed by wet appliances, lighting, cold appliances and cooking (Department for Energy and Climate Change, 2014). Interacting systems of user practices, technologies, institutions and businesses are at play here (Shove, 2003; Spaargaren, 2011; Tukker et al., 2010; Foxon, 2011).

Within these interacting systems the role of large retail businesses is important for five reasons. Firstly, retailers influence people's needs, desires, lifestyles and product choices through their role as intermediaries (Stewart and Hyysalo, 2008), through pricing (Shankar and Bolton, 2004), promotion, shelf space allocation and shelf positioning (van Nierop et al., 2011; Kök et al., 2009). Secondly, retailers are adept at representing their views of consumer needs to government (Marsden and Wrigley, 1995; DEFRA, 2010). Thirdly, retailers' scale of possible influence on social norms seems also large; on the one hand, almost every person in the UK visits shops regularly and, on the other, the retail sector directly employs one in eight workers (British Retail Consortium, 2014). Fourthly, retailing has become increasingly concentrated (Jones et al., 2005) with few large chains accounting for most consumer spending; the top four grocery retailers in the UK now have two thirds of all grocery sales (Mintel, 2013) and thus increased buyer power with suppliers (Inderst and Wey, 2007). Finally, then, these large retailers have been increasingly the gatekeepers between manufacturers and consumers through their global supply chains (Huber, 2008). Through these supply chains, large retailers influence the specifications and standards of the goods they commission from suppliers to sell (Stewart and Hyysalo, 2008). Since, the vast majority of consumer goods in developed markets are sold through large retailers, in shops or online, these retailers act as choice editors (Charter et al., 2008) for what consumers are able to purchase for use at home.

1.2. Retailers and corporate responsibility for consumption emissions

Large retailers in general have a consistent history of corporate responsibility reporting, have recognised the importance of climate change to sustainability, and made emission reduction commitments for their own operations (Gouldson and Sullivan, 2013). Retailers' choices about the assortment of goods that they stock, and how they display, price, promote and suggest methods of use for them, have an influence on shoppers' purchase decisions, and therefore, ultimately, on usage. It is therefore important to analyse their plans and actions for the types of goods that generate carbon emissions from the use of the products they sell. There has been research on retailers' assortment strategies and space allocation choices in the interests of corporate responsibility, but largely focused either on Fairtrade products (Nicholls, 2002; Jones et al., 2003) or organic and Fairtrade food products (van Nierop et al., 2011; van Herpen et al., 2012), with the exception of Carrero and Valor (2012) who examine retailers' assortments for a broad range of ethical and environmental issues. There has also been research on the role of labelling schemes for relative energy efficiency in use, some of them devised by retailers (Heinzle and Wüstenhagen, 2012; Horne, 2009). Berry et al. (2008), McKinnon (2010), Upham and Bleda (2009) and Upham et al. (2011) have examined retailers' use of carbon labelling schemes and their potential impact across the whole value chain. However, there is a gap in research focused solely on the influence of retailers on consumer emissions, whilst energy-consuming products in the UK are

purchased predominantly from large retailers (Mintel, 2014). Therefore there is an importance in understanding what retailers have done for consumer emissions reduction relating to domestic goods.

Researchers have examined shoppers and shopping behaviour and how it is influenced from a number of disciplines; examples are from psychology (Dholakia et al., 2010), history (Blaszczyk, 2000; Trentmann, 2004; Spiekermann, 2006), sociology (Cochoy, 2007), social psychology (Gabriel and Lang, 2006) and operational research (Kök et al., 2009). Recently, behavioural science has increased its impact in policy making, for example through Thaler and Sunstein (2008), and practical guidance has been published for policy makers seeking to influence consumer behaviour change, based on considering three academic perspectives; behavioural science, social psychology and social practice theory, some examples of this are Southerton et al. (2011), Dolan et al. (2010) and Van Bavel et al. (2013). Given the breadth of research on how shoppers can be influenced, then, there are gaps in research examining retailers' strategies that explicitly set out to influence consumer behaviour in the use phase of energy consuming goods, or goods that are serviced through energy consuming appliances, such as clothing.

1.3. Research objectives

Changes in carbon emissions from consumption are needed and retailers are a means of influencing consumption emissions. Retailers can influence the selection of products and services at the shopping stage, and also the usage behaviour at home. The aim of the paper is a structured assessment of the initiatives that retailers have publicly declared that they've undertaken in these two areas of influence, against criteria that are set out within a well-known strategic sustainable development framework. There are two aspects to this assessment; what has been their strategy for the design of the initiatives and how they frame consumer behaviour change, from the selection of mechanisms used.

The objectives of this research then, are, firstly, to identify possible gaps in the strategic planning for these retailers' initiatives, using the attributes and general design of a framework for strategic sustainable development, set out in Table 1 below, and, secondly, to identify possible gaps in the framing used in the selection of mechanics for influencing consumer behaviour change, shown in Table 2 below.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 has described the relevance and importance of retailers to consumer behaviour and the research gaps and objectives. Section 2 makes the case for the research frameworks and methods used, describing also the eighteen identified initiatives. Section 3 analyses those initiatives using the frameworks. Section 4 discusses the results, their validity and limitations. Section 5 concludes with suggestions for policy makers and retailers for future use of the research methods.

2. Methods

2.1. Framework for strategic sustainable development

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) is a planning method that has been successively developed since the early 1990's (Robèrt, 1994; Holmberg, 1995; Holmberg and Robèrt, 2000; Missimer, 2013), and has been used by businesses in order either to design programmes of action, in dialogue, that work toward their vision of sustainability, whilst meeting their customers' needs, or to create engagement (Broman et al., 2000; Holmberg and Robèrt, 2000). It has also been used as a unifying framework to complement other methods, tools and concepts for sustainable