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Understanding the inherent complexity of sustainable consumption: A social cognitive framework☆

Marcus Phipps [a,*], Lucie K. Ozanne [b], Michael G. Luchs [c], Saroja Subrahmanyan [d], Sommer Kapitan [e], Jesse R. Catlin [f], Roland Gau [g], Rebecca Walker Naylor [h], Randall L. Rose [i], Bonnie Simpson [j], Todd Weaver [k]

[a] University of Melbourne, Australia
[b] University of Canterbury, New Zealand
[c] The College of William and Mary, United States
[d] St. Mary's College of California, United States
[e] The University of Texas at San Antonio, United States
[f] Washington State University Tri-Cities, United States
[g] The University of Texas at El Paso, United States
[h] The Ohio State University, United States
[i] University of South Carolina, United States
[j] University of Calgary, Canada
[k] Point University, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential of a theoretical framework, based on social cognitive theory (SCT), to inspire future research into sustainable consumption. The SCT framework provides a dynamic perspective on sustainable consumption through exploring the interactive nature of personal, environmental and behavioral factors of consumption. The SCT framework, which builds on prior theoretical models of sustainable consumption, incorporates the concept of reciprocal determinism, wherein personal, environmental and behavioral factors create a feedback loop to influence each other. Two examples, toy sharing in New Zealand and water conservation in Australia, illustrate the dynamic nature of sustainable consumption and the potential of an SCT based framework to provide a more nuanced view of behavioral change in this context. From these two examples, several ideas for future research emerge to help illustrate the potential of SCT to inform and inspire the next wave of research on sustainable consumption.

"The common conception is that motivation leads to action, but the reverse is true — action precedes motivation. You have to prime the pump and get the juice flowing, which motivates you to work on your goals. Getting momentum going is the most difficult part of the job, and often taking the first step is enough to prompt you to make the best of your day." — Robert McKain, author

1. Introduction

This article defines sustainable consumption as consumption that simultaneously optimizes the environmental, social, and economic consequences of acquisition, use and disposition in order to meet the needs of both current and future generations (Luchs et al., 2011). The general consensus globally is that sustainable consumption is desirable, important and necessary (EcoPinion, 2009; Nielsen, 2011), but these positive attitudes do not necessarily translate into sustainable consumption behaviors (Prothero et al., 2011). This article proposes adopting a generalized framework based on social cognitive theory (SCT), an underutilized theory in marketing research, as an avenue to further develop an understanding of the factors influencing sustainable consumption.

The impetus for this article was the 2011 Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) conference and, more generally, the call to action by David Mick to advance an understanding of practical problems in order to make a positive difference in the lives of consumers (Mick, 2006). In addition, the article adopts the challenge from Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt (2012) and McDonagh, Dobscha, and Prothero (2012) to infuse a sustainability perspective into the core values of TCR through a focus on sustainable consumption. The authors concur with that suggestion and attempt to advance the understanding of sustainable consumption by using an SCT-based framework.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9035 5738.
E-mail address: mphipps@unimelb.edu.au (M. Phipps).

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SCT is unique in focusing on the role of behavior as not just an outcome, but also as a determinant of other factors. SCT suggests that "…human functioning is explained in terms of a model of triadic reciprocality in which behavior, cognitive and other personal factors, and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants of each other" (Bandura, 1986, p.18). Originally developed in social psychology, SCT has received limited attention within the marketing field, with only two studies in the major marketing journals referencing the theory (Dellande, Gilly, & Graham, 2004; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011). Furthermore, prior studies across the marketing field only address specific aspects of SCT such as the personal factor self-efficacy (Wang & Netemeyer, 2002) or the influence of others (Dellande et al., 2004), rather than the entire model. Core concepts within the SCT framework, in particular reciprocal determinism, have not been explicitly explored within the marketing literature. In essence, SCT challenges researchers to examine the interdependency of the three general factors in the model – personal, environmental, and behavioral – and, most importantly, probe how behavior can influence both personal and environmental factors in a recursive fashion.

Using Bandura's social-cognitive theory as a novel and useful starting point, the article develops a framework intended to guide future research in sustainable consumption. The framework is not intended to serve as a fully specified theory for purposes of prediction or explanation. Rather, similar to the approach of Epp and Price (2008) to stimulating research on consumption aspects of family identity, the goal of the proposed SCT-based framework is to capture the complexity of factors underlying sustainable consumption behaviors and to provide a heuristic model that can be used to suggest interesting topics for future research. The first section of this article reviews some key theoretical models that have been used to understand sustainability related consumption behaviors. The second section highlights the key contribution of SCT – reciprocal determinism – whereby past behavior can influence both personal and environmental factors and, in turn, affect future behaviors. The third section demonstrates the dynamic nature of sustainable consumption behavior and the usefulness of SCT in advancing understanding through two examples: sharing within toy libraries in New Zealand and water conservation in Australia. The final section shows how revisiting prior theories in light of the SCT framework helps identify new opportunities for research. Thus, this work intends to encourage a new approach to sustainability research that incorporates a more dynamic and integrated perspective on sustainable consumption.

2. Models of sustainable consumer behaviors

Previous research has explored sustainable consumer behavior by considering the same factors that affect consumer behavior in other contexts. These perspectives range from simple models of rational choice to complex attribute-based models. For instance, many models of environmentally significant behavior build on existing theories such as expectancy-value theory. The basic tenet of expectancy values models is that people behave in order to maximize expected benefits from their actions (Jackson, 2005). Thus, consumers weigh the expected benefits of each decision versus the expected costs in order to determine which option provides the greatest value. However, environmentally significant behaviors are somewhat unique in that the behavior often involves making decisions with outcomes that affect the environment and/or others, either directly or indirectly. This section looks at the development of two of the better known models to illustrate how expectancy-value has evolved to incorporate morality based values (e.g., altruism) into an understanding of sustainable consumer behaviors, such as those focused on environmental issues. These models are Stern's (1999) Values–Beliefs–Norms model, and Ölander and Thøgersen's Motivation–Opportunity–Abilities (MAO) model. For a more detailed review, see Jackson (2005).

2.1. Value–Beliefs–Norms (VBN)

Paul Stern and his colleagues developed one of the better-known theories of environmentally significant behavior (Jackson, 2005; Stern, Kalof, Dietz, & Guagnano, 1995), Value–Beliefs–Norms (VBN) theory, which integrates Schwartz's (1973) moral norm activation theory, the theory of personal values and the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP). VBN's central premise is that pro-social beliefs and personal moral norms are significant predictors of pro-environmental behavior (Stern, 1999). The model states that if consumers hold strong altruistic and biospheric values, they are more likely to accept the beliefs of the NEP worldview. The NEP consists of a new set of values that pay respect to natural limits and the importance of preserving the balance and integrity of nature (Dunlap & van Liere, 1978). However, according to VBN, the stronger consumers' egoistic value orientation, the less likely they are to accept the NEP.

Research has shown that acceptance of the NEP correlates positively with awareness of the (environmental) consequences of one's actions, which in turn leads individuals to become aware of their responsibility to reduce those consequences (Jackson, 2005). These beliefs include beliefs about the consequences of different behaviors, both consequences for the environment and for oneself. Similarly, consumers' values may lead to rejection of the NEP and, therefore, contribute to beliefs that are counter to sustainable consumption — such as when consumers perceive sustainable products as inferior to traditional ones. Research has shown a potential stigma around environmentally friendly or recycled/refurbished products being perceived as less effective compared to traditional product alternatives (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010).

Further, according to the VBN, consumers develop personal norms based on their beliefs about who is responsible for given consequences of environmentally significant behaviors. This norm could entail a personal sense of obligation to take pro-environmental action (Stern, 2000) or a belief that others instead need to modify their behaviors. Norms can both facilitate (Thøgersen, 2005) or impede (Press & Arnould, 2009) sustainable consumption behaviors. The Value–Beliefs–Norms model consistently explains more variance in a range of environmental behaviors (including environmental citizenship, policy support and private sphere behaviors) than many competing theories (Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, & Kalof, 1999).

2.2. Motivation–Opportunity–Abilities (MAO)

While the VBN is one of the most consistent predictors of pro-environmental behaviors, others have since built on VBN to incorporate other factors. Ölander and Thøgersen's (1995) Motivation–Opportunity–Abilities (MAO) model builds on the motivation orientation of VBN to include the role of habits and task knowledge (i.e., ability) and situational conditions (i.e., opportunity), to identify potential constraints and enablers of sustainable behaviors.

The ability construct incorporates both a habit and task knowledge element. For example, individual consumers may face resource constraints in terms of time, money, cognitive capacity, or skill sets to achieve sustainable lifestyles. These constraints can force difficult trade-offs (Thøgersen, 2005).

The opportunity construct incorporates structural constraints. The decision to adopt pro-environmental behaviors such as reducing energy consumption or recycling is affected by the availability of appropriate infrastructure and facilities and sustainable options (Koos, 2011; Press & Arnould, 2009; Thøgersen, 2005). Even when sustainable options are available in the environment they can be expensive or difficult to locate compared to traditional products, thereby reducing sustainable consumption (Tanner & Kast, 2003). Thøgersen (2005) suggests that reducing the time and effort demanded to consume sustainably – in other words, changing environmental conditions – may be more important than pricing. Other external factors such as actions (or