Journal of Business Research 67 (2014) 12–22

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

Pro-environmental behaviors for thee but not for me: Green giants, green Gods, and external environmental locus of control☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 August 2011
Received in revised form 1 April 2012
Accepted 1 July 2012
Available online 15 May 2013

Keywords:
External environmental locus of control
Pro-environmental behaviors
Green marketing
Structural equation modeling
Attitude–behavior relationship

ABSTRACT

Understanding consumers' allocation of environmental responsibility to external forces (i.e., those perceived to be beyond their direct control) is important yet under-researched. This paper examines how these external attributions affect consumers' pro-environmental behaviors (PEBs). A model of external environmental locus of control (i.e., external-ELOC) is tested, consisting of two superordinate dimensions: powerful-others (encapsulating corporate and government responsibility facets) and chance/fate (incorporating God/higher-power and natural earth-cycle facets). The two higher-order factors negatively associate; such that consumers ascribing environmental responsibility to powerful-others engage in PEBs; whereas those attributing environmental change to chance/fate typically do not. The results inform practical and public policy implications; pinpointing ways for corporations and governments to target their pro-environmental efforts and to sway consumers who share in the ecological burden.

1. Introduction

The convergence of three trends – globalization (and the concomitant rapid expansion of middle-class consumer markets), burgeoning population growth, and widespread evidence of environmental degradation (Friedman, 2009) – has brought environmental issues to the very forefront of public, political, and academic discourse. A recent cover story in the Economist (2011) heralded the anthropocene epoch, from which the label describes how "humans have become a force of nature reshaping the planet on a geological scale" (p. 11). An extensive body of research exists on the topic; mostly conducted from the perspective of consumption, and mainly delving into the links between consumers' pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors (Cleveland, Kalamas, & Laroche, 2005; Leonidou & Leonidou, 2011; Sarigöllü, 2009; Urien & Kilbourne, 2011). Yet the findings have been mixed, contradictory, or trivial. The majority of consumers expresses concerns about the environment in general, and furthermore, admits to apprehension about the environmental impact of their own consumption behaviors. Notwithstanding public displays of recycling (often mandated by law) this concern has largely not been matched with behavioral changes, as evidenced by the meager market shares achieved by environmentally-friendly alternatives and the growing ecological footprint occupied by the average consumer. Evidently, environmental concern is an indispensible but insufficient basis for sustainable consumption.

The predictive power of psychographics (attitudes, values, and lifestyle variables) in explaining PEBs is nevertheless considerably higher than that achieved by standard demographic variables (Cleveland et al., 2005; Guagnano, 1995). The most promising findings pertain to attitudinal constructs associated with perceptions and attributions of control over pro-environmental outcomes. To this end, most research focuses on notions associating with individual consumers' dispositions of personal (i.e., internal locus of) control. Few examine the role played by consumers' external loci of control.

Many individuals strive to be environmentally conscious; at the same time, perceiving external constraints on the effectiveness of individual consumer actions (Thøgersen, 2005). Recognizing that the sustainability of private consumption behavior is affected not only by the individual, this research examines consumers' perceptions regarding the roles played by governments and businesses (i.e., green giants), as well as perceptions regarding chance/fate factors (i.e., green Gods). The focus here is on external facets of environmental locus of control; a topic that has received scarce attention, when compared against the extensive body of research focusing on the relationship between internal environmental dispositions (e.g., self-efficacy, perceived consumer effectiveness, perceived environmental control, and internal environmental locus of control: Cleveland, Kalamas, & Laroche, 2012).

☆ The authors thank the reviewers for their invaluable suggestions and gratefully acknowledge the research support provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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0148-2963/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.03.007

While the current state of the ecology is ultimately the product of trillions of past and present aggregated individual behaviors, it is also the result of the activities of many thousands of corporations and institutions, all operating within the larger economic and regulatory frameworks constructed by the governmental bureaucracies of nation states and global bodies. As such, researchers aver that – to a greater or lesser extent, depending on individual and situational characteristics – internal and external dispositions coexist and often are in conflict within the same consumer (McDonald, Oates, Young, & Hwang, 2006). Cleveland et al. (2005, p. 200) state that "consumers' interaction with the environment will have taught them whether and to what degree they can exert control over their surroundings." The position taken here is that these dispositions manifest differentially according to the salience of the environmental context. Simply stated, external environmental locus of control (hereafter, external-ELOC) encapsulates the extent to which consumers attribute pro-environmental outcomes to external forces perceived beyond their personal control.

Operationalizing external-ELOC, comprehensively capturing the multidimensional qualities of the construct, is the first goal of this study. The second goal is to improve upon the consistently weak abilities of attitudes in explaining pro-environmental behaviors (hereafter, PEBs) cataloged in the literature; demonstrating that the relationship varies across pro-environmental contexts. The third goal is to identify market segments defined by the scores achieved on the powerful-others and chance/fate dimensions of external-ELOC, and to compare these scores along gender and religious faith.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. The pro-environmental attitude–behavior relationship

Undoubtedly, the most popular theory linking attitudes to behaviors is Azjen's (1985) theory of planned behavior (TPB), which – building upon Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of reason action – is notable for the inclusion of perceived behavioral control; in other words, individuals' perceptions of their *ability* to behave in a certain way. For example, the consumer may have a positive attitude towards the environmentally-benign alternative and this attitude could also be reinforced by the norms of their peer group, yet this alternative may not be selected due to a lack of immediate availability, because it is too expensive, not worth the extra cost/effort (e.g., due to the perceived futility of being green).

Perceived behavioral control has corresponding constructs in the environmental literature; including perceived environmental control (Smith-Sebasto, 1992), perceived consumer effectiveness (Roberts, 1996) and environmental locus of control (Allen & Ferrand, 1999). According to Cleveland et al. (2005, p. 198), the latter "stands between general, dispositional measures of locus of control (LOC) and transitory, situation-specific attitudes" and (compared to other control-related measures) effectively captures consumers' tendency to engage in PEBs.

2.2. External-ELOC

Levenson's (1974) work, refining the internal–external (I–E) locus of control (LOC) perspective proposed by Rotter (1966), finds many hundreds of citations across a wide range of disciplines. Rotter conceptualized LOC dichotomously along a single continuum, whereby individuals categorize as either internals or externals. Internals should be motivated to undertake PEBs because they believe that their behavior can bring about a desirable outcome; whereas externals should be little motivated to engage in the same because they feel they lack mastery over the situation; thus sensing disconnection between their behavior and a preferred end result.

Studies on Rotter's scale have yielded mixed and often contradictory findings. Levenson (1974) argues that interpretations obscure because the I–E scale lacks consideration of the expectancy of control by powerful others. She argues that it is critical to distinguish between individuals who believe in an unordered world (i.e., chance expectancies) from those having a powerful-others orientation. In the latter case, individuals believe in an ordered world because a potential for control exists. Levenson proposes a tripartite distinction, involving three scales for internal, powerful others, and chance (i.e., IPC) dimensions, thus differentiating between two classes of externals. This expanded conceptualization suggests several relationships between pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. A consumer may lack motivation to engage in PEBs because they ascribe ecological responsibility to powerful others, specifically government and business decision makers. Alternatively, the consumer may be motivated (or not) to engage in PEBs, however, s/he may perceive that any personal efforts would be ineffectual (Sarigöllü, 2009)—especially if s/he believes that these powerful others are loath to act in kind. In this case, the costs of being environmentally responsible are borne by the consumer, yet the benefits to society at large are negligible. Finally, without economic inducements s/he will avoid PEBs altogether if s/he attributes environmental conditions to natural causes or subject to fate (the will of God or a Higher Power).

The subject of another paper by the current authors, internal-ELOC is defined as "consumers' multifaceted attitudes pertaining to personal responsibility towards and ability to affect environmental outcomes" (Cleveland et al., 2012, p. 293). The external domain of ELOC encapsulates attitudes towards environmental outcomes that consumers believe are the result of extraneous forces beyond their volition. Two categories likely playing a role in the environmental A–B correspondence encapsulate those forces that remain subject to human control – albeit beyond that of most individuals – and those forces that are deemed truly beyond human control (i.e., powerful others and chance or fate aspects of IPC). These categories are fundamentally different. The former implies that the solutions for environmental degradation lie with humankind and the latter implies that humans are ipso facto powerless in regards to long-term environmental conditions.

2.3. External-ELOC: powerful-others

Alongside energy generation, transportation, agriculture, and consumer consumption (all interrelated with business activities), the economic activities of corporations collectively rank as one of the largest sources of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation (e.g., soil erosion, depletion of natural resources, destruction of biodiversity). Totaling $2.15 trillion in 2008 (with greenhouse gas emissions accounting for most of the damage), "medium-to-large sized publicly listed companies cause over one-third (35%) of global externalities annually" (PRI & UNEP Finance Initiative, 2010, p. 4). Many individuals are thus likely to feel a sense that any environmentally-beneficial actions on their part would be mitigated by the sheer volume of the activities of huge corporations or that any benefits would be lost if other actors in society free ride on those personal efforts (Stern, 1992). The barriers to environmental action extend beyond the individual to include social and institutional forms. While industries can enact and abide by voluntary agreements regarding waste/pollution and resource use, only politicians and governments have the ability to impose binding standards (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions) and other legal restrictions (which might also include subsidies for purchasing environmentally-friendly alternatives or investing in environmentally-benign manufacturing technologies/processes) on the environmentally-harmful activities of individuals and companies. Through such actions, "governments can mitigate global change by imposing desired behavior on citizens" and firms alike (Stern, 1992, p. 292). Compared to individual consumers however, governments and corporations are two of the major powerbrokers in the environmental sphere—each wielding considerable influence. "Because the power to make a significant difference, one way or the other, to global or even local environmental change is immensely unevenly distributed[,]" the