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Green purchase behavior of undergraduate students in Hong Kong



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 January 2015

Received in revised form

13 September 2015

Accepted 11 November 2015

Available online 28 November 2015

Keywords:

Green marketing practices

Attitudes toward the environment

Perceived environmental responsibility

Green products purchase willingness and behavior

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the effect of undergraduate students' perceptions of green marketing practices on their attitudes toward the environment, their perceived environmental problem seriousness, and their environmental responsibility. Additionally, it examines whether their green products purchase willingness and behavior will eventually be affected. A sample of undergraduate students in Hong Kong is used. The measurement and structural models are examined with the partial least squares approach to structural equation modeling. The structural model is a good fit to the data. This research reflects a parsimonious picture about undergraduate students' expectations of green marketing practices, environmental perception, and purchasing behavior, and provides insights for green marketers to formulate strategies to encourage well-educated students to consume green products.

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1. Introduction

Unsustainable consumption patterns worldwide lead to serious environmental issues, such as global warming and climate change, which drive people to change their conventional lifestyles. It is clear that the ways in which consumers choose goods and services have both direct and indirect effects on the environment and their collective well-being (Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2014). When the business sector promotes effective green marketing concepts and sustainable marketing plans, consumers are likely to walk the extra mile and pay the premium price to behave in an eco-responsible manner and achieve green consumerism (Polonsky & Rosenberger, 2001).

Green consumerism refers to environmentally concerned consumption, including lower consumption, green purchasing, and less pollution (Hoffmann & Schlicht, 2013;

Lin & Hsu, 2015). In the eyes of environmentalists, such consumers possess the so called "pro-social" consumer behavior and are socially conscious of and responsible for environmental protection (Wells, Ponting, & Peattie, 2011). From the social marketing perspective, green consumerism reflects the motivational tendency of individual consumers (Moisander, 2007) and underscores a social dilemma, in which individual, societal, and environmental interests are at odds (Gupta & Ogden, 2009; Schuitema & de Groot, 2015). Research has further found that green consumers, compared with non-green consumers, have a higher intention to "go green" when they have a greater green marketing satisfaction (Park, Ko, & Kim, 2010).

Such a green consumerism concept has come in the Asian region (Gurāu & Ranchhod, 2005). As Asian consumers are increasingly aware of the pressing environmental problems in the fast-growing global economy (Li & Su, 2007), they are becoming a primary target for international green marketers. Elham and Wahid (2011) point out that exploring the influence of green marketing on purchasing behaviors in emerging Asian markets is considered to be timely and important.

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According to Lee (2009), green consumerism in Hong Kong is at the stage of emerging. Environmental issues in Hong Kong, particularly the solid waste problem, have drawn the public's awareness of protecting the environment in recent years. The consultation document of the Environmental Protection Department (EPD) (2012) indicates that Hong Kong residents (1.45 kg per capita) create more wastes than residents in Taipei, Tokyo, and Seoul (0.88, 1.03, and 1.08 kg per capita respectively). Regarding daily waste disposal, Hong Kong (0.87 kg per capita) ranks top, followed by Taipei, Tokyo, and Seoul (0.35, 0.41, and 0.79 kg per capita respectively). The document concludes that reducing waste generation and disposal in Hong Kong should be a prime concern.

Among different age groups, the younger generation is more ready to accept new and innovative ideas (Ottman, Stafford, & Hartman, 2006). Lee (2008, 2009) uses a very large sample of high school students to study young consumers' green purchasing behaviors. As these students' buying decisions may often be governed by their parents, the results may not be very useful for formulating business strategies. Vicente-Molina, Fernandez-Sainz, and Izagirre-Olaizola (2013) suggest that consumers, who tend to be aware of eco-friendly products and are knowledgeable about environment-related issues, are usually highly educated people. Students at the undergraduate level are referred to as young and highly educated. These young adults usually make their buying decisions without consulting their parents (Brougham, Jacobs-Lawson, Hershey, & Trujillo, 2011). As purchasing green products has become an effective solution for lessening the burden on the environment due to human activities in product production and consumption (Ho, Dickinson, & Chan, 2010), research investigating factors affecting undergraduate students' green purchase behaviors is worthy of pursuit. Because researchers have conducted little research in this area, the present study aims to explore how undergraduate students' perceptions of green marketing practices affect their willingness to purchase eco-friendly products and their subsequent purchasing behaviors.

According to the existing studies, people's perceptions of green products may affect their propensity to engage in green purchase behaviors, which stem from a future-oriented concern and are thus unlikely to deliver immediate personal gains (McCarty & Shrum, 2001), through other factors. Companies' green marketing strategies and purchasing practices may help to enhance consumers' attitudes toward the environment and their perceptions on environmental seriousness and environmental responsibility (Liu, Wang, & Shishime, 2012; Straughan & Roberts, 1999). Chamorro, Rubio, and Miranda (2009) further highlight the possible development in consumers' attitudes, intentions, and behaviors in new research.

This research paper first presents a review of the existing literature that helps develop the hypotheses. Next, it explains the adopted research method, particularly about how to conduct the statistical analysis, and presents the findings of the data analysis. In the discussion part, research and practical implications as well as conclusions wrap up the study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Green marketing strategy on green products

Green marketing refers to activities that are designed to generate and facilitate the exchange of environmentally friendly goods and services intended to satisfy human needs or wants (Polonsky, 2011). It is a system that promotes the green labeling and advertising of goods and services with the aim of either reducing or eliminating any detrimental effects on the environment. The way in which the products are promoted by green marketing varies in product functions, manufacturing processes, packaging and advertising, and along the supply chain (Cherian & Jacob, 2012; Polonsky, 2011). Additionally, companies with green marketing strategies would pay great attention to designing, promoting, pricing, and distributing the products in a manner promoting environmental protection (Polonsky, 2011).

Green marketing is significant in shaping consumers' attitudes, perceptions, and responsibility toward the present environmental situation and pressing environmental problems. Due to rising awareness among consumers about eco-friendly products, effective green brand management and appropriate marketing strategies can predict consumers' attitudes (Cherian & Jacob, 2012). Kang and James (2007) formulate a definition relevant to businesses in arousing public environmental consciousness of minimizing damages to the environment when producing products. Therefore, firms' marketing strategies of their eco-friendly products can enhance consumers' perceived seriousness of the environmental problems. Lai (2000) finds that Hong Kong people are more literate regarding environmental problems. The knowledge and awareness that they possess on environmental problems may make them more responsible toward the environment.

Overall, companies' efforts on green marketing practices that promote eco-friendly products do have the potential to alter consumers' attitudes, perceived seriousness, and perceived environmental responsibility pertaining to green products purchase behavior (Cherian & Jacob, 2012).

Hypothesis 1a. Consumers' perceptions about the importance of green marketing practices positively affect their attitudes toward the environment.

Hypothesis 1b. Consumers' perceptions about the importance of green marketing practices positively affect their perceived seriousness of environmental problems.

Hypothesis 1c. Consumers' perceptions about the importance of green marketing practices positively affect their perceived environmental responsibility.

2.2. Consumers' attitudes toward the environment

Environmental attitudes refer to the cognitive judgment toward environmental promotion and protection (Lee, 2009; Cherian & Jacob, 2012). According to the theory of reasoned action, "people consider the

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