



I do it, but don't tell anyone! Personal values, personal and social norms: Can social media play a role in changing pro-environmental behaviours?



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ABSTRACT

With increasing global pressures on agriculture as well as increasing environmental concerns, and confusing or even misleading information about food, consumers still need to make multiple daily decisions about food purchases and consumption. Consumers have complex personal and socially driven values as well as situational information affecting their food choices. This two-part study examines consumers' values and norms to determine how these relate to their personal food choices and the influence of social media based comparison tools on this behaviour.

Quantitative data was collected concerning personal values and norms as well as reactions to a social media comparison site. Our study shows that using appeals based on self-esteem and materialism and via social media would not be effective in bringing large-scale behavioural change towards environmentally friendly foods. Our contribution is twofold. First, we extend current knowledge around values, norms, beliefs and predicted behaviours within the context of environmentally friendly foods (EFF). Second, we examine whether these values or norms can be used as stimuli to encourage EFF purchasing through the use of social media. Whilst it is useful to understand these relationships, in order to exploit them and to effect change within society, social marketing messages would need to appeal to norms other than self esteem, materialism, rationality or peer influence through social media. Our study shows that as things stand now, social media is not an effective means of changing either values, norms or behaviours around EFF.

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1. Introduction

The latest IPCC Report on Global Warming representing input from 1250 experts and 194 Governments gives warning that carbon emissions have soared in the last decade and are growing at double the previous rate (IPCC, 2014). Despite this ominous message the IPCC argue that rapid action can still limit global warming to an acceptable level. A key area where the need for change has been identified is in the production, trade and consumption of food products. Food production has also been identified as a critical contributor to numerous other environmental problems (Paul and Rana, 2012; Tanner and Kast, 2003). Fostering changes in the food chain is thus seen as a crucial step in the quest for sustainable development (Cheah and Phau, 2011; Grankvist et al., 2007).

Although consumer's awareness of environmental concerns is high (Bleda and Valente, 2009; Bonini and Oppenheim, 2008; Dunlap, 2008; Vermeir and Verbeke, 2006), there remains a significant disconnect between consumer's stated environmental values and attitudes

and their pro-environmental behaviours (Diaz-Rainey and Tzavara, 2012; Englis and Phillips, 2013; Tarkiainen and Sundqvist, 2009). Studies show that a far lower percentage of consumers actually buy environmentally-friendly products than those who say they are concerned about the environment (Thøgersen et al., 2012; Ubilava et al., 2010). Indeed, it seems only about 10% of consumers act on their pro-environmental attitudes (Englis and Phillips, 2013). This disconnect between consumer attitudes and behaviours is even greater with food purchases for several reasons. First, food purchases tend to be low involvement and the result of quick decisions. Second, there is a lack of information about the environmental impact of food products, and third, consumers may hold different attitudes towards environmental issues dependent on specific food segments (Stanton and Guion, 2010).

Two models that have been extensively used to explain consumer's environmentally-friendly behaviour are the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) and the Norm Activation model (NAM) (Schwartz, 1977). Both models assume that consumers act in a rationally-informed manner, driven by self-interest.

The TPB predicts consumer behaviour based on the intention to perform the behaviour and levels of perceived behavioural control. It has been widely applied in relation to food purchasing/organic foods (e.g. Chen, 2007; Dean et al., 2008; Thøgersen, 2007). The TPB assumes

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that two main external factors influence behavioural intentions; attitudes and subjective norms (Nilsson et al., 2004). Subjective norms are derived from the way an individual perceives that other significant referents (people or groups) would behave. The term “subjective norm” in TPB captures both social norms, and the individual's susceptibility to social pressure to perform in a certain way (Nilsson et al., 2004). However, the TPB does not explicitly examine the relationship between personal and social norms.

The NAM (Schwartz, 1977) is wider in its explicatory power and also considers the role of **personal** norms as an influence on pro-social behaviours. Personal norms, as defined in the NAM, are experienced as a feeling of moral obligation to act in accordance with an individual's own value systems. The NAM proposes that personal norms are internalised from social norms, which describe acceptable or desirable ways of living. Personal norms then translate into behaviours when an individual is aware of the harmful consequences of their actions and ascribes responsibility to themselves to change the condition. There has been relatively limited application of the NAM to food purchasing behaviours (exceptions include Honkanen et al., 2006; Klöckner & Ohms, 2009).

There are two significant problems with using either of these models of consumer behaviour, with regard to environmental issues, and especially environmental/food issues. The first is that both models assume a **rational relationship** between norms, attitudes and decision-making, i.e. that the consumer actually considers the end result of their consumption decision and then acts in a rational manner. Yet for EFF, consumers often have limited information about the impacts of their decisions, and there is a need for quick decision.

The second problem is that there is still a lack of understanding of which particular values, norms and attitudes might impact the relationship between a stated intention and the actual behaviour. Most environmental research has focused on the relationship between attitudes and behaviours, but both behavioural models predict some sort of relationship between personal values and norms and social norms, and indeed, underlying personal values are seen as determinants of both attitudes and behaviours (Rokeach, 1973; Schultz and Zelezny, 1999; Schwartz, 1992; Windrum et al., 2009). This complex relationship between consumer values and their attitudes is less well-documented (Rohan, 2000; Hauser et al., 2013). This is further complicated by numerous studies that use the terms norms and values in different ways.

In recent years, social media has shaped both social and personal norms and attitudes through the rapid and intense sharing of images and information. Social media's interconnectedness enables individuals to be quickly exposed to others' behaviours, and this exposure is likely to impact both personal norms and behaviours (Chu & Kim, 2011; Zeng, Huang, & Dou, 2009). In particular, for issues where social comparison is high, social media can significantly affect individual behaviours (Kropp, Lavack & Silvera, 2005). However, the role of social media in influencing personal norms, values and attitudes has rarely been examined, and with respect to EFF, there appear to be no prior studies.

The aim of this study is therefore twofold: to deepen our understanding of consumer actions towards EFF by investigating consumers' underlying personal values, and secondly, to determine the relationship between these deep-seated values and the impact of social media. In so doing, we hope to identify particular norms and values which are of significance in the decision to purchase EFF, and to understand how social media might be used to influence pro-environmental behaviours.

The first part of this study examines the values of individual self-esteem, social comparison level, materialism and contextual beliefs about the environment. These findings are then examined in the light of a social media setting (a mock facebook page) to determine if these deep-seated values could be used to affect the way in which they would share, compare and adjust their attitudes and behaviours. In so doing, this study extends previous work and introduces a mechanism for social comparison to determine if this could affect norms or behaviours.

The next section of this paper examines three key personal values that have been associated with consumer pro-environmental behaviour in previous research, as well as reviewing the Norm Activation model in more depth.

1.1. Social and personal norms

Social norms are ways of behaving that are agreed upon by society, with individuals expecting others to follow socially accepted expectations and obligations. Normative concerns appear to play a key role in pro-environmental behaviour by making people especially sensitive to how they think both *themselves* and *others* should behave (Thøgersen, 1996). Lindenberg and Steg (2007) state that “a person in a normative goal frame takes the trouble to turn down the central heating when opening the window even if (s)he does not have to pay for the heating bill, simply because this is the “appropriate” thing to do” (Lindenberg and Steg, 2007, p120).

The NAM proposes that social norms influence an individual's actual behaviours through their influence on personal norms (Fig. 1) (Schwartz, 1977). An individual's personal norms are defined as their own beliefs and are linked to their self-concept. This model is potentially useful in partially explaining prior research into the effect of social norms on pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. Cialdini et al., 1990; 1991; Ebreo et al., 1999; Milfont et al., 2010).

According to the NAM, there are two conditions that must be met for a personal norm to result in altruistic behaviours such as environmentally-friendly behaviour. First, is an awareness of consequences and, second, is the ascription of responsibility (Schwartz, 1977). In other words, an individual must understand both the result of performing (or not performing) an action, and must be willing to accept responsibility for that decision. This resultant feeling of obligation should then guide future behaviours. As discussed above, many consumers hold positive attitudes to the environment without behaving in an environmentally friendly way (Cleveland et al., 2012). Using the NAM, it would be argued that for an individual with a pro-environmental belief to purchase EFF, the individual must be aware of both the purpose of environmentally friendly consumption and the consequences of inaction, as well as accepting responsibility for purchasing EFF (Schwartz, 1977). In situations where individuals are initially unaware of their responsibilities, they could be influenced by either social norms (Hage et al., 2009), and/or cues (branding, labelling, signage etc.), which could make them aware of the consequences of certain actions.

However, when the NAM has been applied to environmental behaviours, the results are, at best, mixed. Although some studies confirm the NAM (e.g. Milfont et al., 2010; Steg and Groot, 2010; De Young, 1986) other research contradicts this. In early environmental research in the 1970s, Heberlein and Black showed that personal norms could change consumers' purchasing of lead free petrol. However, this finding was tempered with the fact that consumers choosing lead free petrol mostly thought that this would reduce their overall costs of petrol consumption (1981). In Vining and Ebreo (1990) studied the recent introduction of recycling, and also found that attitudes towards the environment were not significant in predicted recycling behaviours. In more recent research, there has been a separation of social norms into descriptive (*what is*) and injunctive (*what ought to be*) and it was found that social norms are only predictive of behaviour when the decision is focused on activating the norm (Kallgren et al., 2000).

The NAM also assumes that the gap between intentions and behaviours can be explained by the relative importance of each norm for an individual. In addition, this gap is also influenced by the level of disapproval an individual expresses when others transgress the norm, and the perceived obligation to follow the norm oneself. The more compelling these three factors, the more likely a social norm is to influence personal norms and behaviours (Lindenberg & Steg, 2013).

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