



Analysis

The influence of contextual cues on the perceived status of consumption-reducing behavior



Jeremy S. Brooks^{a,*}, Charlie Wilson^b

^a School of Environment and Natural Resources, The Ohio State University, 210 Kottman Hall, 2021 Coffey Rd., Columbus, OH 43210, USA

^b Tyndall Center for Climate Change Research, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 June 2014

Received in revised form 8 June 2015

Accepted 15 June 2015

Available online 3 July 2015

Keywords:

Sustainable consumption

Materialism

Status

Environmental behavior

Conspicuous consumption

Costly signaling

ABSTRACT

The question of whether and when behaviors that reduce overall consumption are associated with low status has not been adequately explored. Previous research suggests that some low cost environmentally-friendly behaviors are stigmatized, but has not accounted for the impact of contextual information on perceived status. Here, we use costly signaling theory to describe why consumption-reducing behaviors may be associated with low status and when and how this perception might change. We report two empirical studies in the U.S. that use a large sample of graduate students ($N = 447$) to examine the effects of contextual information on how consumption-reducing behaviors are perceived. We then explore the perceived appropriateness of consumption-reducing behavior for signaling status relative to alternative non-environmental behaviors. Using linear mixed-effects models, we find that information indicating that consumption-reducing behavior is a choice results in higher perceived status. However, we find that consumption-reducing behaviors are perceived to be less appropriate for conveying status than consumption-intensive behaviors. The environmental orientation of the respondent has little effect on perceptions of status in both studies. These results provide insights into the dynamic, evolutionary process by which sustainable consumption might become more socially acceptable and the social factors that may inhibit this process.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Consumption is in many ways a social process that communicates information about identity, signals status, and indicates membership in, or distinction from, social groups (Belleza et al., 2014; Berger and Heath, 2008; Sütterlin and Siegrist, 2014). Perceptions of the social signals associated with behaviors and purchases, and the ways other people interpret those signals, can shape consumption patterns. Here, we examine the status signals associated with environmentally-friendly forms of consumption to determine whether and in which contexts concerns about status might inhibit sustainable consumption, and we consider the dynamic process by which sustainable consumption might become more socially acceptable.

There is a long history of exploring the symbolic nature of consumption, the signaling function it serves, and how social context can shape consumption decisions or practices (see Jackson (2005), Miller (2009), and Axsen and Kurani (2012) for reviews). Status is

one characteristic that individuals can display through consumption, and the pursuit of status and social distinction can contribute to conspicuous overconsumption (e.g. Veblen, 1899). However, as awareness of environmental problems increases, norms about appropriate behavior can change along with the symbolic meaning attached to environmentally-friendly consumption. Recent studies have highlighted the symbolic value of pro-environmental behaviors (Noppers et al., 2014) and noted that behaviors can vary in their symbolic significance, which has important implications for how these behaviors are perceived and adopted (Sütterlin and Siegrist, 2014). Other studies suggest that being seen as environmentally friendly has social value and that status considerations can motivate high-cost, 'green' consumption (Delgado et al., 2015; Griskevicius et al., 2010; Sexton and Sexton, 2014).

However, fewer studies have explored the relationship between status and low cost environmental behaviors that reduce consumption of energy and materials. One study suggests that low cost environmental behaviors (e.g. riding the bus or line drying laundry) are associated with low status (Sadalla and Krull, 1995) while another suggests that low cost behaviors are not socially stigmatized (Welte and Anastasio, 2009). The relationship between low cost environmental behaviors and social status has not been adequately explored, nor has the implication of status perceptions for the spread of such behaviors.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: brooks.719@osu.edu (J.S. Brooks), charlie.wilson@uea.ac.uk (C. Wilson).

Both status and consumption are complex, multi-faceted terms. We define status to be one's relative standing or rank in a group¹ that has been awarded by others based on prestige and deference, and which typically, although not always, correlates with wealth or other socioeconomic indicators. Status is one form of social value associated with certain behaviors and consumption patterns. Status is also important because both theory (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001; Richerson and Boyd, 2005) and empirical research (Cohen and Prinstein, 2006; Van den Bulte and Stremersch, 2004) suggest that the behaviors and practices of higher status individuals are more likely to be adopted and spread. While by no means the sole determinant of consumption (Ropke, 2009), the perceived status of goods or services can impact their diffusion.

Low cost behaviors that reduce consumption are important because of the implications for sustainability. We use 'consumption-reducing behavior' in contrast to 'green' consumption and 'consumption-intensive' behaviors (see Box 1 for definitions). The distinction between 'consumption-reducing' and 'green' consumption is similar to the difference between 'curtailment' or 'conservation' behaviors (e.g., turning off the lights) and 'efficiency' behaviors (e.g., using energy efficient light bulbs) (Karlin et al., 2014).

Technological advances, particularly in improving material and energy efficiency, enable 'green' consumption but may be insufficient for reaching long-term sustainability goals (Jackson, 2009) due to rebound and substitution effects (Jenkins et al., 2011), and scale effects linked to rising affluence (Myers and Kent, 2004). 'Green' consumption may be more socially acceptable, but it perpetuates a society that values the acquisition of material goods. These concerns have led to calls for changes in the social and cultural structures that create the conditions for overconsumption (Speth, 2012). Conversely, 'consumption-reducing' behaviors may reduce overall material and energy consumption, but may be hindered by perceptions that associated lifestyles are relatively lower status.

Here, we use costly signaling theory to describe why consumption-reducing behaviors may be associated with low status and when and how this association might change. We report two empirical studies in the U.S. that use a large sample of graduate students to determine (i) the effects of contextual information on how those engaged in consumption-reducing behaviors are perceived, (ii) the appropriateness of consumption-reducing behavior for signaling status relative to alternative consumption-intensive behaviors, and (iii) group differences in these perceptions. The results suggest that information about the motivations for consumption-reducing behavior can clarify the social signal and increase the perceived status of such behaviors. However, such behaviors are still perceived to be less appropriate for conveying high status than consumption-intensive behaviors. These insights have important implications for the adoption and spread of sustainable consumption. In the following sections we discuss the relationship between status and consumption, explain how costly signaling theory helps us understand that relationship, and present and interpret key results.

1.1. Status and Consumption

Because humans are a highly social species, part of the benefit derived from consumption comes from how it is viewed by others (Heffetz, 2004). Individuals can use material consumption to display wealth and signal earnings potential, which are often equated with status (Godoy et al., 2007). Status is an important motivating force because high status individuals are evaluated more favorably, deferred to more,

¹ We each belong to multiple groups at a given time, particularly in modern society, and the size of relevant in-groups can range from small peer groups to political parties, religions, and nations. Further, behaviors can signal group identity and/or social differences. Thus, "rank or standing within a group" need not imply that social signals are only relevant for a small group of well-known peers.

Box 1 Definitions of key terms.

Consumption-reducing	Behaviors that provide either less of a good or service, or a qualitatively different good or service, than consumption-intensive behaviors but with lower environmental impact. The reduction or change in the good or service is typically achieved through behavioral change rather than the purchase of a particular product. These behaviors typically have no or low monetary costs but potentially substantial non-monetary costs (e.g. time, knowledge, effort, inconvenience).
Green consumption	Consumption that provides the same good or service as consumption-intensive behavior, but with lower environmental impact, which is typically achieved through the purchase of a product that increases efficiency.
Consumption-intensive	Non-environmental options that stand in contrast to green consumption or consumption-reducing behaviors (e.g., driving an SUV compared to driving a Prius (green consumption) or taking the bus (consumption-reducing)).

and have more resources allocated to them (Hardy and van Vugt, 2006; Henrich and Gil-White, 2001).

The relationship between consumption and status has been examined through research on conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899), positional goods (Hirsch, 1976), and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977) (see Heffetz (2004) for a brief review). Conspicuous displays of consumption signal that one can afford to spend money on a product that has only slightly more (if any) functional value, but has greater symbolic value than a more commonplace product. Those who can afford such displays benefit from higher social ranking in societies in which wealth and high incomes are valued. The pursuit of status, therefore, provides one explanation for overconsumption. We consume luxury goods we do not 'need', in part, to signal our wealth and acquire status. Further, because relative status is more important than absolute status (van Vugt et al., 2014), we are compelled to match or exceed the consumption patterns of those around us to remain distinct and worthy of deference (Hirsch, 1976).

1.2. Costly Signaling, Status, and Sustainable Consumption

The economic cost of conspicuous consumption makes costly signaling theory an appropriate framework for understanding these dynamics. Costly signaling theory describes the mutually beneficial and reliable communication of traits or attributes that are hard to perceive directly (Bliege Bird and Smith, 2005). Particular behaviors or practices communicate a signal, which, when recognized by the observer, benefits both the sender and the receiver (Cronk, 2005). Using superficial cues to signal underlying traits allows for more efficient coordination between the sender and receiver (McElreath et al., 2003). For a superficial cue to be a reliable shortcut, the signal must accurately represent the underlying trait. In the context of conspicuous consumption, the costliness of a given purchase ensures that only those who can afford to display that signal can use it to communicate (Bliege Bird and Smith, 2005).

However, conspicuous consumption is not the only way to signal one's ability to absorb costs. Cooperative, prosocial behavior also entails individual costs and can therefore be status-enhancing (van Vugt et al.,

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5049282>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5049282>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)