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## Barriers to green consumption behaviours: The roles of consumers' green perceptions

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The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of consumers' green perceptions (CGPs) which encompasses consumers' current perceptions of green products, green consumers, green consumption practices, and green marketing communications. We hypothesise that CGPs may influence their consumption behaviour and how ready they are to be green. Focus groups were used to explore the concept of CGPs. Stage Two involved two surveys in Australia and New Zealand to test and corroborate the themes that were identified in the exploratory study.

We identified five dimensions underpinning CGPs. These include "product perception", "hard to be green", "green stigma", "perceived sense of responsibility" and "readiness to be green". This paper presents the findings from both studies, provides empirical insights into Australian and New Zealand consumers' green perceptions and demonstrates the explanatory power of CGPs in predicting green consumption behaviour, in particular their likelihood to purchase green household products.

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### 1. Introduction

Consumers are a key driver when it comes to sustainable production because they account for more than 60% of final consumption in the OECD countries (OECD, 2008, 2016). Accordingly, they would have a major impact on green growth<sup>1</sup> if they purchased environmentally-friendly products and modified their behaviour to support environmental goals (OECD, 2016). Recent reports would appear to suggest that consumers' environmental consciousness and positive attitudes towards the environment have been increasing over the years (e.g., CEAP, 2007; Eurobarometer, 2011; Nielsen, 2014). For example, in a global study by Nielsen (2014), 55% of the respondents reported their willingness to pay more for products and services from companies who are committed to having a positive social and environmental impact. However, the adoption rate of environmentally-friendly (EF) products in recent times has been declining (Clifford and Martin, 2011). Despite their growing concerns for the environment, consumers are not purchasing EF offerings as regularly as expected (e.g. Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Carrington et al., 2010; Chatzidakis et al., 2004; Gleim et al., 2013;

Gupta and Ogden, 2009). For example, in Australia, Nature's Organics, the largest brand to market its homecare products based on their green image, held only a 4% value share in the overall Australian homecare market in 2014 (Euromonitor International, 2014). Whilst researchers have made significant contributions to understanding what drives green consumption behaviour (for a comprehensive review, see Peattie, 2010), it remains puzzling as to why consumers who profess to have pro-environmental attitudes do not purchase EF products regularly, if at all. As Gleim et al. (2013) posits, the lack of consumer acceptance of EF products implies that many barriers to green consumption continue to exist. To increase the uptake of EF products, understanding why these barriers continue to exist is crucial.

A number of researchers have identified barriers to green consumption. For instance, Gleim et al. (2013) reported price and expertise (lack of) as being barriers to the consumption of green products. He et al. (2016) studied Chinese consumers and found that consumer preference, reference group and face perception contributed to non-green consumption behaviour. These findings complement earlier works that looked at perceptions; more specifically, trust and pro-social status, perceived risk performance, price, quality and consumer cynicism were some of the reasons why environmentally conscious consumers chose not to buy greener products (e.g. Borin et al., 2013; Chen and Chang, 2013b; Gupta and Ogden, 2009; Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008; Zabkar and Hosta, 2013). These studies shed valuable insights but they also appear fragmented. This raises the question of whether a more comprehensive concept could help capture the essence that underpins these green barriers more inclusively and perhaps more efficiently. This led us

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<sup>1</sup> According to OECD (2016), green growth means "fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies". Green growth is "a subset of sustainable development entailing an operational policy agenda that can help achieve concrete, measurable progress at the interface between the economy and the environment".

to “consumers’ green perceptions”. Consumers’ attitudes and behaviours are often shaped by their perceptual interpretations and perceptual judgments of stimuli that they are presented with (Johnstone and Tan, 2015). For example, if consumers perceive green products to be too expensive (price), require too much effort (e.g. expertise/knowledge; time), or are too difficult to obtain (e.g. availability), they would be less likely to perform the purchase behaviour. Likewise, consumers may be hesitant to purchase green products if they hold adverse perceptions towards green messages (e.g. cynicism, trust) and towards consumers who are stereotyped as “greenies” (e.g. self-identity). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the concept of consumers’ green perceptions (CGPs) which encompasses consumers’ current perceptions of green products, green consumers, green consumption practices, and green marketing communications. In so doing, it aims to contribute to our understanding of green consumption barriers. We propose that exploring CGPs could be a more integrated way to understand these barriers. We argue that even though consumers may have pro-environmental attitudes, their green perceptions could influence their consumption behaviour and readiness to be green.

Within the context of EF household products, the low adoption rate implies that green consumers are a niche market while the non-green consumers reflect the mainstream population. To increase the EF product uptake, efforts should be made to expand the “non-green” consumer market. Whilst the literature has investigated the “green consumer”, it has tended to overlook consumers who are “not-so-green” (Hooper and Johnstone, 2015). This study includes consumers with varying levels of green purchase behaviours, namely those who have always (green), sometimes (not-so-green) and rarely (non-green) purchased EF household products. Understanding the perceptions of the latter two groups, and juxtaposing the findings against the “green consumers” group, could provide additional insights into what is impeding green consumption behaviour.

The paper begins with a brief literature review. We then discuss the qualitative study that was used to explore CGPs. Next, we discuss the quantitative study that was conducted to test and corroborate the themes identified in the exploratory study before presenting the empirical findings from the Australian (AU) and New Zealand (NZ) surveys. Following that, we present the regression results to demonstrate the explanatory power of CGPs in predicting green consumption behaviour (GCB). We conclude with a discussion on the implications and provide some propositions for future research.

We use the terms “environmentally-friendly” (EF) or “green” products interchangeably throughout the paper. For the purpose of this study, green products are products that “consumers perceive to be environmentally-friendly, whether it is due to the production process, the types of materials or ingredients used to manufacture the product, packaging, marketing communications, and so on” (Johnstone and Tan, 2015, p. 312).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Definition of green consumption behaviour

As Peattie (2010) posits, green consumption is a problematic concept because “green implies the conservation of natural resources while consumption generally involves their destruction” (p. 197). Additionally, green consumption intertwines with other concepts such as ethical, sustainable and responsible consumption, leading to a lack of clarity within the literature (Peattie, 2010). Several definitions were found in the literature; most associated green consumption with environmental protection (e.g., Tanner and Wölfing Kast, 2003), consumer social consciousness and responsibility (e.g., Moisander, 2007), while others related it to consumption reduction (e.g., Huttunen and Autio, 2010). As He et al. (2016) summarise, the concept of green consumption includes “a framework of con-

sumption perception, objects, processes and results” (p. 346). Commonly, consumers’ green consumption behaviour (GCB) includes recycling, protecting waterways, bringing own shopping bags, the purchase and consumption of EF products etc.

### 2.2. Drivers to GCB

#### 2.2.1. Socio-demographic and motivational drivers

A considerable amount of effort has also gone into defining and profiling green consumer segments (e.g. Chen and Chang, 2013a; Peattie, 2001; Roberts, 1996; Shrum et al., 1995), primarily in psychological terms including consumer personality (e.g. Lu et al., 2015; Shrum et al., 1995) and socio-demographic terms (e.g. Kinnear et al., 1974; Laroche et al., 2001; Robert and James, 1999; van Liere and Dunlap, 1981). However, these approaches have often generated inconsistent and thus inconclusive results. This indicates the limitation of using socio-demographics characteristics when trying to understand GCB (Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; Roberts, 1996). Likewise, the characteristics of the consumer alone do not determine GCB (Rex and Baumann, 2007).

As reported in the literature, motivational drivers influencing GCB include factors such as emotional affinity towards nature (e.g. Chan, 2001; Kals et al., 1999), personal circumstances (e.g. Solér, 1996), values (e.g. Schuitema and de Groot, 2015; Young et al., 2010), ethical beliefs (e.g. McDonald et al., 2012; Newholm and Shaw, 2007) and personal norms (Moser, 2015).

#### 2.2.2. Environmental knowledge and attitude

Environmental knowledge is often assumed to drive GCB (e.g. Bartkus et al., 1999; Schlegelmilch et al., 1996); this is based on the rationalist model which assumes that people will engage in more pro-environmental behaviour if they are educated about environmental issues (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002). However, the empirical evidence for this relationship is not clear, suggesting that the relationship between environmental knowledge and behaviour is far more complex (Chan, 1999, 2001). In particular, Hines et al. (1987) found that there was only an average correlation of  $r = 0.299$  between environmental knowledge and behaviour amongst the seventeen studies they analysed. A recent study by Pagiaslis and Krontalis (2014) revealed that although consumers’ environmental concerns were a very strong antecedent for GCB, high levels of concern for the environment did not necessarily result in an increase in situation or product-specific environmental knowledge. That is, even with heightened environmental concerns, consumers “have not engaged in significant cognitive processing of the effects of specific green products or behaviour” (Pagiaslis and Krontalis, 2014, p. 344). This finding runs parallel with Kollmuss and Agyeman’s (2002, p. 241) argument that “environmental knowledge per se is not a prerequisite for pro-environmental behaviour”, as most people have insufficient knowledge about environmental issues to act environmentally responsibly.

Numerous studies have attempted to predict GCB using consumers’ attitudes towards the environment because attitudes are widely recognised as a major factor that guides human behaviour (Bredahl, 2001). One recurring theme in the literature is the “attitude-behaviour gap” or the “green gap”. As several studies have found, consumers’ positive attitudes about the environment do not necessarily translate into actual purchase behaviour in practice (e.g. Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Chatzidakis et al., 2004; Gupta and Ogden, 2009; Pickett-Baker and Ozaki, 2008). Common explanations for the green-gap are inflated self-reported environmental attitudes due to socially desirable bias (Peattie, 2010). Other explanations include the effects of social norms (Rettie et al., 2012, 2014) and the presence of various constraints that impede the adoption of GCB (see Section 2.3).

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