



Consumer Sustainability Consciousness: A five dimensional construct



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines consumer triggers towards sustainable consumption behaviours, proposing Consumer Sustainability Consciousness as a new construct that allows us to understand what drives the conscious consumption of sustainable products and services, in an integrated “Triple Bottom Line” perspective.

Consumer Sustainability Consciousness is proposed as a five-dimensional construct involving: Sense of Retribution; Access to Information; Labelling and Peer Pressure; Health Issues; and Crisis Scenario. The proposed construct was defined using the C-OAR-SE procedure and measured and validated using both Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis. As a result, a 19-item scale is proposed to measure Consumer Sustainability Consciousness; theoretical and practical implications of the study are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Sustainability: an overview

The [Brundtland Commission Report \(1987\)](#) provided us with the most widely accepted definition of Sustainability: “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”. The three pillars of Sustainability, known as the “Triple Bottom Line”, are the cornerstones of what can also be designated in a marketing mix perspective as the “3Ps”: Profit – Economic Benefits; People – Social Benefits; and Planet – Environmental Benefits ([Placet et al., 2005](#)).

In [Table 1](#), we list the main studies found in the literature that separately consider the environmental, social or the economic perspectives of sustainability. As we understand, the environmental perspective as been further explored than the social one and no scale was found measuring how consumers understand economic benefits as a way to really provide welfare for people and planet. Even in the stream of research on ethics, which considers two of the three cornerstones of sustainability (environmental and social), no scale was found to fit the integrated scope of this study, where the intention is to understand how the consumer becomes aware

(or conscious) and therefore driven to consume more sustainably. Furthermore, no study was found regarding consumers' sustainability consciousness, despite the scales and constructs capable of measuring parts of the proposed construct that aim to provide an integrated view explaining consumer sustainable consumption behaviour.

Each of the three perspectives summarized in [Table 1](#) are presented and explained in detail in the following sub-sections.

1.2. Social perspective

The “Social Consciousness Construct” was introduced 50 years ago with the need to capture consumer concerns regarding social issues, using the “Social Responsibility Scale”. This scale measures an individual's traditional social responsibility. Initially developed by [Berkowitz and Daniels \(1964\)](#), it was later used by [Berkowitz and Lutterman \(1968\)](#) to further develop the topic.

Other types of scales, such as the “Lifestyles scale” from [Fraj and Martinez \(2006\)](#), focus on the way people live their lives, showing a more integrated perspective concerning aspects related to a balanced life, healthy diet and environmental concern and protection ([Sanchez et al., 1998](#)). Also, current demand of sustainable consumerism that shows an increasing willingness to integrate social responsibility in product purchase decision, explains the rise of consumers' level of commitment to these issues that have been observed as having a positive effect on purchase behaviour ([Lacey and Kennett-Hensel, 2010](#)).

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Table 1

Overview of the main concepts, constructs and scales found in the literature on consumer or business social, environmental and economical perspectives.

Constructs	Description	Statistical method	Author (year)
Social perspective			
Socially Conscious Consumer Scale	Social Responsibility Scale with 8 items	Linear Discriminant Analysis	Anderson (1972)
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	Perceptions of the firm's involvement in corporate giving, including its support of non-profit organizations	Confirmatory Factor Analysis	Lacey and Kennett-Hensel (2010)
Lifestyle Scale	Identify what values and lifestyles best explain environmentally friendly behaviours.	Structural Equation Modelling	Fraj and Martinez (2006)
Environmental perspective			
Ecological Attitudes and Knowledge	Ecology scale	A two-factor (Groups X Subscales) analysis of variance	Maloney and Ward (1973)
Environmental Consciousness (EC)	Multi-dimensional construct, consisting of cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural components	Regression analysis	Schlegelmilch et al. (1996)
Green Customer Purchase Intention	Consumer involvement with green purchase intention	Descriptive Measures and Correlation Analysis	D'Souza et al. (2006)
Ecological behaviour (EB)	Dimension of the individuals' real ecological commitment with the environment	Structural Equation Modelling	Fraj and Martinez (2006)
Natural Environmental Orientation (NEO)	Embraces various perspectives towards nature, such as the love of nature and seems to be suited for explaining nature-protective behaviour.	Structural Equation Modelling	Mostafa (2007)
Green Purchasing Behaviour	Purchasing behaviours for general green products	Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis	Lee (2008)
Economic perspective			
Creating Shared Value	Creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges.	Conceptual	Porter and Kramer (2011)

1.3. Environmental perspective

Decades ago, Maloney and Ward (1973) started to claim that the effect of man's behaviour on the environment had been relatively ignored, while the inverse was widely studied. The author also emphasises that "a basic reconceptualization of the problem in terms of human behaviour dictates a solution in terms of altering that same behaviour". In this sense, if we are to study sustainable behaviour within the perspective of a positive change on the consumption paradigm, this has to be taken into consideration. Therefore, it is essential to understand the extent of the population's awareness regarding the environment and social protection aspects as the primary steps before modelling and implementing the modification of these relevant behaviours. Maloney and Ward (1973) created a framework to better understand consumers' "Ecological behaviour" proposing the "Actual Commitment subscale". This subscale was later adapted by Fraj and Martinez (2006) and analyses how people have changed their selection of products from a bundle of ten items due to their pollutant effects while also trying to be informed about environmental issues and other related problems. Also, many studies were conducted to understand consumers' environmental concerns and choices regarding green products (D'Souza et al., 2006; Lee, 2008).

This topic has also been approached by academia from an "environmental consciousness" perspective meaning that, as Borland (2009) states, the "consumers' response to green companies differs by how environmentally conscious they are". According to Bennet and Bennet (2008) "consciousness by definition is heightened sensitivity to, awareness of, and connection with our unconscious mind". This means that the concept of consciousness is related to the awareness level of a consumer regarding a certain topic.

The "Environmental Consciousness Construct" proposed by Schlegelmilch et al. (1996) includes three measurement scales: (a) the environmental knowledge scale; (b) the environmental attitudes scale; and (c) the recycling behaviour scale, proposed to bring new insights on the topic. Later, Ottman (1994) developed the concept of the green consumer and defined the idea of an "individual

that seeks only to consume products that cause less or no damage to the environment".

Furthermore, Schlegelmilch et al. (1996) reinforced that a dramatic increase in environmental consciousness worldwide is believed to have caused a profound impact on consumer behaviour. Thus, marketing strategies are beginning to merge with sustainable principles, as they envision conscientious consumers' satisfaction with portfolios and production processes that contribute to the economy and society as a whole (Salgado Beltrán and Gil Lafuente, 2005).

1.4. Economic perspective

Porter and Kramer (2011) recently developed the state of the art concept of Shared Value. The authors understand that capitalist system is unable to sustain corporate growth if businesses insist on a just for-profit perspective as this has been seen as a major cause of social, environmental, and economic problems. Therefore, the concept of Shared Value is explained in terms of "creating economic value in a way that also creates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges" (Porter and Kramer, 2011). This means that businesses should start to understand that there is a very concrete path to increasing productivity and expanding markets if society needs are recognized as a priority to be addressed, in detriment to the conventional economic needs. The authors admit that this "can give rise to the next major transformation of business thinking" (Porter and Kramer, 2011).

Despite of all this, it is, unfortunately, of common sense that making a profit is a golden rule for most businesses in the world. Borland (2009) however, states that the corporate economic dimension should not dominate the social and environmental ones. The author suggests that these last two dimensions should not take second thoughts or be measured against the economic dimension. This might happen because socio-cultural and environmental (physical) wellbeing is usually dependent on economic (financial) wellbeing. Considering the above, corporate strategic sustainability arises when the integration of the principles of sustainability start

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