



The many faces of sustainability-conscious consumers: A category-independent typology

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ABSTRACT

Responding to the global call for a “sustainable economy” requires meaningful insights into sustainability-conscious consumers and their actual buying behaviors. Sustainable consumption is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon because it encompasses several distinct behavioral patterns and consumption types. Therefore, companies are well advised to recognize multiple types of sustainability-conscious consumers with different expectations, attitudes, and values and to implement targeting strategies that do not rest on the assumption of homogeneity. Thus, the objective of this study is to provide a more fine-grained picture of (un)sustainable consumer segments and their differentiated effects in different product markets. Based on three large datasets, we create a robust six-segment typology of consumer consciousness regarding sustainable consumption. By using panel data on actual purchases, the results show not only that sustainability concerns significantly positively influence actual sustainable purchases, as expected, but also that sustainable buying can occur independently of sustainability concerns.

1. Introduction

Consumers are considered key stakeholders in the planning and implementation of corporate strategies and marketing activities oriented toward increasing sustainability (Leonidou, Katsikeas, & Morgan, 2013). Different research streams have used different labels for sustainability-oriented consumers, such as mindful consumers (Lim, 2017; Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011) and ethical consumers (Auger, Devinney, Louviere, & Burke, 2008; Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). Whereas theoretical frameworks with broader perspectives on sustainability-conscious consumers have been developed (e.g., Huang & Rust, 2011; Kotler, 2011; Sheth et al., 2011), they require further conceptual development and empirical evidence. Thus, most studies adopt a one-sided environmental view of sustainability (e.g., Diamantopoulos, Schlegelmilch, Sinkovics, & Bohlen, 2003; Roberts, 1996). Following Elkington's (1997) triple bottom line approach, sustainability encompasses not one but three dimensions focused on the planet (environment), people (society) and profit (economic). Thus, sustainability concerns extend considerably beyond green consumption (Huang & Rust, 2011). They also relate to purchases of fair-trade

products (e.g., De Pelsmacker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2005) and to access to products through sharing models (e.g., Belk, 2010). Notwithstanding in-depth insights from studies that focus on only one of these issues, investigating how different facets of sustainable consumption concerns are interconnected and how differently they affect buying behavior could deepen the existing understanding of sustainability. Researchers should provide a comprehensive approach to sustainability (Lim, 2017) and a comprehensive account of the many faces of sustainability-conscious consumers in a well-founded typology.

Many empirical studies address sustainable segmentation typologies. Despite having the same objective, they differ in many aspects, including the concept of sustainability and the segmentation variables considered. An important issue for scientific research into creating sustainability typologies is the treatment of the ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. In particular, the economic aspects of sustainable consumption have often been neglected in recent studies. Many segmentation studies focus on the environmental dimension and identify “green” or “non-green” segments for individual product categories (e.g., organic food) and rely on self-reported behaviors or purchase intentions. Hence, these sustainable segmentation

Abbreviations: CSC, Consciousness for sustainable consumption; PVQ, Portrait Values Questionnaire

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typologies only consider different levels of consumers' general sustainability concern (strength of consciousness), simply distinguishing between low and high levels of concern, and neglect the existence of different patterns among sustainable consumption behavior types (modes of sustainable consumption, such as organic and fair trade consumption; Verain et al., 2012). Consequently, knowledge about the interaction between an individual's level of sustainability concern and actual buying behavior in different consumption situations, e.g., organic vs. fair-trade products, is lacking (van Herpen, van Nierop, & Sloot, 2012).

In summary, some shortcomings are recognizable in the extant empirical studies on sustainable consumption segmentation. The present study addresses these research gaps and proposes a comprehensive consumer typology. In particular, our segmentation approach expands the realm of sustainable consumption by capturing three dimensions of sustainable consumption (ecological, social, and economic) in one typology-building approach and, thus, considers the generally neglected economic mode of sustainability consumption. This segmentation thereby extends beyond considering merely the dimension of strength with regard to sustainable consumption concern to describe different modes of sustainable consumption behavior (e.g., green and fair trade buying or product sharing). Finally, the results of our study provide evidence that the consumer typology relates to actual purchasing behaviors and is applicable across product categories. Thus, the general objective of the present study is to provide a more fine-grained picture of distinguishable sustainable consumption styles and their differentiated product buying effects.

2. Sustainable consumption and segmentation typologies

2.1. Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption can be defined as “consumption that simultaneously optimizes the environmental, social, and economic consequences of acquisition, use and disposition in order to meet the needs of both current and future generations” (Phipps et al., 2013, p. 1227). Balderjahn et al. (2013) introduced the concept of consciousness for sustainable consumption (CSC), which is defined as a state of concern “to consume in a way that enhances the environmental, social and economic aspects of quality of life” (Balderjahn et al., 2013, p. 182). In particular, the environmental dimension of the CSC model captures consciousness of purchasing products that are produced, packaged or disposable in an environmentally friendly manner, while the social dimension is concerned with the treatment of workers during the manufacturing process (respect for human rights, no discrimination, no illegal child labor, and fair compensation). Balderjahn et al. (2013) provide evidence that the economic dimension involves deliberate decisions concerning whether to spend money on a product. From a sustainability perspective, buy-or-not-to-buy decisions result in the following three modes of consumption: 1) voluntary simplicity, 2) debt-free consumption, and 3) collaborative consumption. Voluntary simplicity describes restraint from materialism, involving consumption based on personal needs, while debt-free consumers consider their long-term financial well-being. Collaborative consumption is understood as sharing, borrowing, renting or leasing consumer goods instead of acquiring property (Belk, 2010). Collaborative consumers do not completely restrict themselves by forgoing a purchase, but they focus on alternative forms of consumption that allow the use of a product without purchasing it. This CSC model is in line with Sheth et al. (2011) and Lim (2017), who emphasize the need for a more holistic view of sustainability and introduce the concept of mindful consumption, which builds on a sense of caring for nature, community and self that leads to more mindful behavior, i.e., temperance in consumption.

2.2. Segmentation typologies

Over the last two decades, numerous empirical studies have aimed to identify sustainability-conscious consumer segments. Segmentation studies differ in many respects: the consumption context (e.g., organic food or apparel purchases; Dickson, 2001; Verain et al., 2012), the sustainability focus (e.g., ethical consumption, healthy lifestyles; Dickson, 2001; Verain, Sijtsma, & Antonides, 2016), the dimensionality of the sustainable consumption concept (one or multiple dimensions), the focal sustainability facet (e.g., environmentally friendly consumption), the segmentation variables (e.g., attitudes, personal traits, human values), the profiling attributes (socioeconomic variables), the segmentation structure (segments reflecting either different low-to-high levels of general sustainability concern or mirroring a multifaceted consumption phenomenon), and the relationships of the segments to (actual) buying behavior (see the review by Grimmer, Kilburn, & Miles, 2016; Verain et al., 2012).

Consumer sustainability segmentation studies focus on ethical buying (e.g., Burke, Eckert, & Davis, 2014; Memery, Megicks, Angell, & Williams, 2012), green purchasing (Straughan & Roberts, 1999), organic food (Verain et al., 2012), fair-trade buying (e.g., Bezençon & Blili, 2011; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005), and more recently, on sharing (Hellwig, Morhart, Girardin, & Hauser, 2015; Lawson, Gleim, Perren, & Hwang, 2016). Different segmentation variables have been used (McDonald, Oates, Alevizou, Young, & Hwang, 2012): attitudinal variables such as motives (e.g., Memery et al., 2012), purchasing reasons (e.g., Burke et al., 2014), attitudes and values (e.g., Poortinga & Darnton, 2016; Verain et al., 2012), as well as behavioral variables such as activities (e.g., Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu, & Shaw, 2006) and organic buying frequencies (Kihlberg & Risvik, 2007).

However, most sustainable consumption segmentation studies focus on the environmental dimension of sustainability (e.g., Burke et al., 2014; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003; McDonald et al., 2012; Memery et al., 2012; Straughan & Roberts, 1999). Recently published studies have tried to provide a broader perspective on sustainability-conscious consumers, for example, by identifying different types of consumers by comparing ethical and conventional store preferences (Memery et al., 2012) and considering the relative importance that consumers place on each of the environmental, social, and economic dimensions of sustainability (Simpson & Radford, 2014). However, very few segmentations capture two or three dimensions of sustainable consumption (e.g., Poortinga & Darnton, 2016; Simpson & Radford, 2014). In particular, the economic dimension is largely overlooked in sustainability segmentation studies, although it is embedded in the well-known concepts of voluntary simplicity (e.g., Iyer & Muncy, 2009; Peyer, Balderjahn, Seegebarth, & Klemm, 2017), collaborative consumption (e.g., Ozanne & Ballantine, 2010), and debt-free living (Seegebarth, Peyer, Balderjahn, & Wiedmann, 2016). Simpson and Radford (2014) and Poortinga and Darnton (2016) have explicitly included three dimensions of sustainability as segmentation criteria. Within scenario conjoint experiments across two contexts (transportation and work commute contexts), Simpson and Radford (2014) examine the importance of ecological, social and economic product attributes together with two situational variables (willingness to compromise and confidence that the action can affect decision-making tasks). However, regarding the economic dimension of sustainability, this paper addresses the advantages of companies (generating profits) but neglects the consumer side (spending money). In addition, by using both sustainable attributes and two situational variables, the segments are somewhat confounded with general relevant decision-making aspects. Poortinga and Darnton (2016) propose a sustainability segmentation model that can be used by governments and civil society organizations across different policy areas related to sustainability. Although the authors integrate all three

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