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Encouraging Sustainable Purchase and Consumption: Identification of Core Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing concerns about sustainability and numerous calls for the emergency to encourage pro-environmental behaviour, it is paradoxical why consumers are still ignoring green alternatives when shopping. Part of the problem reflects the fact that market share of green products is still very low, even when companies claim sustainable and pro-environmental production. A further challenge reflects the "intention-behaviour gap", i.e. discrepancy between what consumers think and what they actually do concerning green purchasing. Although researchers questioned this gap in sustainable consumption, results are dispersed across different studies and are not univocal. Therefore, identification of approaches that narrow the consumer intention-behaviour gap for sustainable goods and services is urgently required.

KEYWORDS

Sustainable Consumption, Green Purchasing, Barriers, Stimulators

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1. The Purpose

The current work embraces the above challenges in the attempt to provide the much-needed understanding of the drivers of consumer behaviour, so that their choice is environmentally sustainable. On one hand, it is crucial to determine core factors precluding consumers from purchasing green. On the other hand, it is vital to explore what could be done to encourage sustainable purchase and consumption. Therefore, barriers and stimulators are both in the focus of the current research. While previous studies usually looked at these factors in isolation, we hereby offer a holistic understanding. A framework is developed based on a profound literature audit and empirical research, as described below.

2. Background

How to close the attitude-behaviour gap in sustainable consumption is the central focus here. Narrowing the investigation down to green products and to purchasing these products, we argue, might provide the needed understanding of the relationship between measurement constructs. Therefore, we address the following research question:

How to encourage sustainable purchase and consumption? In particular, we ask what the key factors are that encourage consumers to buy green. We further address potential barriers, and thus, how to turn these barriers into stimulators.

Based on an extensive literature review, we hypothesise that economic, physical and social factors are

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crucial drivers of sustainability purchase and consumption. Economic vulnerability has been acknowledged as an important parameter determining consumption (Karaosmanoglu et al., 2024). The authors noted, nevertheless, that a favourable perception of social capital change reflects in increased prosocial behaviour. Furthermore, studies claimed that experiencing social pressure from peers might foster the intention to purchase green. It turns however, that consumers do not necessarily act in a sustainable way, especially when doubting (significant) others ' pro-environmental behaviour. The above scenarios are also in line with the participation and inclusion principle, postulating that people may express their potential and realise action only when an appropriate supportive environment is provided (for review see Tsiotsou et al., 2024). Furthermore, individualism-collectivism orientation was acknowledged as a significant moderator of the social responsibility effect (Aljarah, 2020).

Based on the above theoretical notions, economic, physical and social factors are tested in two consecutive studies, as described in detail below.

3. Methodology

In both studies, we asked EU consumers to provide their opinions concerning the most influential factors that may preclude, and, respectively, encourage their green purchasing behaviour. Two approaches, focus groups (study 1) and surveys (study 2), were combined. The reason for selecting a mixed method is to better capture consumers' insight, as well as to enrich the identification of approaches that narrow the intention-behaviour gap for sustainable goods and services.

3.1 Participants

25 people took part in study 1 (focus groups), 17 of which female. The mean age was 24 years old. In study 2 (surveys), 200 people took part, 137 of whom were female, with a mean age of 22 years old.

3.2 Design and procedure

In study 1, after an introduction to the study (purpose) and an overview of sustainability production and consumption, a discussion was conducted. The discussion focused on two core pillars. First, attitudes and intention to purchase green products were debated. Then, the key factors influencing participants' green purchase and consumption were examined. Based on the outcomes of study 1 and theoretical notions from a profound literature audit, the survey questions were designed for study 2. In study 2, after the introduction, the questions were displayed to consumers in an online survey. The survey encompassed constructs concerning attitudes, intention to purchase, and actual green purchase. Factors hypothesised to preclude and/or to stimulate green behaviour were addressed as well.

The research was approved by the ethical committee of the home university. In both studies, at the beginning, participants completed a consent form and were debriefed at the end. Participation was voluntary, and a raffle distributed vouchers as incentives.

3.3 Analytical procedure

In study 1, after transcription and coding of focus group sessions, Cohen's Kappa inter-rater reliability was tested to ensure good agreement between the coders. In study 2, the relation between the attitudes, intention to behave, and actual green purchasing behaviour was analysed by multiple linear regression modelling. We also probed for differences in behaviour response between male and female respondents.

4. Results and discussion

Results from both studies are unambiguous in showing that key barriers precluding consumers from purchasing green are economic, physical, and social. Perceived price of the green products was a leading criterion modulating consumers' choice to purchase (or not) green. Availability of money was also pointed out. These outcomes are very important in the debate on intention-behaviour gap. While some studies reported a low willingness to spend money on sustainable products, others claimed that the willingness to pay for green may outperform the availability of money. Therefore, we could say that willingness to spend extra money for sustainable products is the crucial driver of consumer choice, modulating the intention-behaviour gap.

Deficit of time and lack of green products in the shop were further barriers, reported by our respon-

dents. They were not willing to spend extra time visiting other shops in order to find sustainable products that are not available in the store where they regularly do their shopping.

Concerning the stimulators encouraging consumers' sustainable purchasing, several factors emerged, among which are receiving health, personal, or local community benefits. These factors correlate with the role significant others (i.e. subjective norm) may play as a driver of sustainable behaviour. When significant others feel, talk, and act pro-environmentally, it is very likely to steer individuals' behaviour towards purchasing green. Social impact could be further multiplied through social media, considering the media's potential to expand reach and enhance consumer thoughts and actions, as reported in another study from our lab (Bialkova and Te Paske, 2021).

5. Implications

Barriers and stimulators for purchasing green are both in the focus of the current research. Note that previous studies usually looked at these in isolation. In this respect, the present work makes a significant contribution to advancing the understanding of how to close the intention-behaviour gap. Based on the holistic framework suggested here, advice for policy implementation and marketing acceleration is provided. First, brands should look for effective marketing (communication) vehicles to increase consumer willingness to spend extra money for green products, should we want to amplify sustainable product options. Emerging as a pivotal determinant in modulating consumer choice, willingness to pay should be well framed when it comes to "green premium".

Second, marketers should increase the sustainable products and services offered by a brand/company. As reported hereby, the deficit of sustainable products (along with regular products in stores) precludes green purchasing. This outcome is a warning call to reconsider the product 's life cycle, and to look for ways to expand production of goods in a sustainable and socially responsible manner.

Third, individuals were much more likely to purchase green when mirroring pro-environmental behaviour as exhibited by their relatives and friends. The significant others (i.e. social norms) impact is especially relevant in the digital era we live in (Bialkova, 2025). Given that social media could multiply the effect of spreading information and reaching end users, this could accelerate the promotion of sustainable purchase and consumption.

And last, but very important, policymakers, marketers, and consumer scientists should join efforts in suggesting transformative approaches to raise awareness and encourage actual green behaviour, and thus, closing the intention-behaviour gap. The key factors emerging here as drivers of green purchasing provide insights into how to best develop such approaches. Based on current work, pertinent strategies could be directly implemented in practice, leading to increased market share of sustainably produced products.

6. Future research

Given that demographics could be pivotal in determining green purchase and consumption, it would be worth having a follow-up study with different market segments. Expanding the research approach across continents is another line that could be pursued. Note that our study was conducted with European customers only. Therefore, it would be interesting to enrol a new exploration encompassing consumers from other cultures across the globe. Such a multicultural investigation would bring extra value in our understanding of barriers and stimulators of sustainable purchase and consumption at the global level. In sum, the current work showed that consumers have strong shopping habits. To turn these into green, brands should increase the offering of sustainable products and services, to more efficiently communicate with clients, suggesting transformative approaches to raise awareness, and thus, encouraging actual green behaviour.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors confirm that there are no actual or potential conflicts of interest associated with their work.

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