

Profiling Green Consumer Characteristics: An Eternal Quandary

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Abstract—It is an irrefutable fact that consumers play an undeniable role in any country's sustainability index advancement. There is evidence that thirty to forty percent of environmental degradation is caused by private household consumption activities. Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of this fact and have started exhibiting concerns towards environmental degradation. These pressures have made business organizations realize that resisting the move towards sustainability is no more viable. Marketers need to be aware of this behavioral change so as to incorporate changes into their marketing strategies befitting the demand of consumers. This led to researchers attempting to profile the characteristics of a green consumer, to facilitate marketers in drawing up appropriate green marketing strategies. This theoretical paper reviews the past attempts made to profile the green consumer characteristics and tries to highlight the complexities involved in the process.

Index Terms—green marketing, green consumer, environmentally conscious consumer

I. INTRODUCTION

Almost four decades after 'Limits of Growth' characterization of challenges facing the ever-growing expansion of industrial societies; human beings have widely recognized the importance of achieving sustainable levels of consumption within the limited capacities of planetary environment. The increase in social and environmental awareness and concern amongst the population had led to the conceptualization of 'environmentally concerned consumer' or 'green consumer'.

Growing popularity of green consumerism further led to the conceptualisation of a broader term called 'ethical consumerism'. Uusitalo and Oksanen [1] explain ethical consumerism as the behaviour of the buyer which reflects a concern towards unethical global trade practices. Ethical consumerism encompasses a wider perspective whereby not only environmental issues but social issues are also considered. Examples of social issues include child labour, violation of human rights, testing on animals etc. Emergence and further popularity of green and ethical consumerism started putting pressures on businesses especially in areas of product, production, processing and resourcing of materials. Next stage of

development was 'sustainability marketing' which gained attention in the late 1990s, with a much broader conceptual scope. Charter and Polonsky [2] explain sustainability marketing as building and maintaining of sustainable relationships with customers, social environment and the natural environment. As the environmental consciousness again gains momentum, as predicted in the twentieth century, 'eco-friendly' or 'going-green' approach is getting pushed into the forefront of marketing strategy formulation. Marketers have no choice but to incorporate these emerging consumer concerns into their marketing decision making, if they wish to survive and if survived, remain competitive in the market [3]. This requires them to understand the behavioural patterns and purchase intentions of green consumers and provide appropriate product offerings so as to create competitive advantage.

Extensive research has been undertaken in the latter half of the last century addressing different dimensions of environmentally conscious consumer behaviour. Identification of variables that influence the environmentally conscious consumer behaviour and establishing relationship between the variables had always been an uphill task for the researchers [4]. Majority of the studies examined the socio-demographic variables, behavioural variables and psychometric scales measuring environmental consciousness and concern [5]-[7].

II. THE VARIABLES

Socio demographic variables including age, gender, income, education and place of domicile, if significant, offer an easy means for segmenting the market [6]. Prior to 1990s, most of the studies which used socio demographic variables were in US/European context, which may not be eligible for generalisation in Asian context. Only late 1990s witnessed some studies being undertaken in Asian context [8]. Despite there is every reason to believe that environmentally conscious consumers are young, urban dwellers with better education and higher income [9]-[12], there are contradicting research outcomes contending the viability of using socio-demographic variables for market segmentation [5], [13]. Wagner [14] pointed out that profiling a green consumer using socio-demographic variables have not yielded strongly indicative results. Another study conducted in the U.K to profile

environmentally conscious consumers found that socio-demographic characteristics are of little value [15]. Schwepker and Cornwell [16] observed that the limited efficacy of socio-demographic factors shows that environmental concern is no longer a marginal issue but a socially accepted norm. Despite inconclusive results obtained in various studies, socio-demographic variables are widely used. A brief review is given in the following paragraph.

Age is one of the most commonly used demographic variables. Even though there is theoretical justification to believe that youngsters are more concerned about environment (as they were grown up in an era of heightened awareness and concern for environmental degradation [17]), research findings are somewhat equivocal. While many researchers found significant negative correlation between age and environmental concern and behaviour, which supports the traditional belief [10], others have found non-significant correlation [18] and even significant positive correlation [7], [5]. More interesting is the results of same study conducted in two different countries. While it was found in a study that the younger respondents of Canada make more environmentally responsible purchases, it was not found to be true in Hong Kong context [19].

Another commonly used variable is Gender. Despite the common perception that the feminine characteristics of 'care', 'concern', 'empathy' and 'sensitivity' make women more concerned of the environment than men, [7], [10], [17]-[18] several gender based investigations had found insignificant correlation [5], [9] and negative significant correlation [20].

Considering income as a profiling variable, it is believed that consumers with higher income exhibit more environmental concern and the logical reasoning for this is that they could afford to bear the additional costs associated with greening of products or policies [17]-[18], [21]. But findings of a few studies that show a negative relationship between income and environmental concerns contradict this widely held belief [5], [7], [22].

Various studies have addressed the role of education as a profiling variable. Notion of positive correlation between the level of education and environmental concern is supported by a vast majority of studies [7], [10], [18], [21]. The logical reason could be that better educated consumers are more knowledgeable and conscious of environmental issues, which may be positively reflected in their purchasing decisions. But more recent depth studies which hypothesised positive relationship between education and environmental knowledge, attitude and behaviour individually found that significant positive relationship exists only in the case of education and environmental knowledge but not between education and environmental attitude and behaviour [22]. This finding paints the picture of a consumer who is aware of environmental issues but the knowledge or awareness does not get translated into environmentally concerned purchase behaviour.

Some researchers have identified place of domicile as a profiling variable. Majority of them who had examined

the relation of place of domicile and environmental concern observed that urban residents were more concerned about environment than rural residents [5], [10], [21]. Justification for this observation could be due to the exposure that urbanites have towards issues concerning environmentalism, compared to consumers in rural areas. A study conducted by International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in six different countries – East Germany, West Germany, Britain, Norway, New Zealand and the USA exhibited a similar pattern when it comes to effects of age, gender and education on environmental knowledge of consumers. Results showed men are more knowledgeable than women; younger people knows more about environment than older people and higher the education level, higher the environmental knowledge [23].

From the review of literature, it can be concluded that the research findings on the relationships existing between different socio-demographic variables and environmental concern are rather equivocal and hence are unreliable predictors of environmentally conscious consumer behaviour. The incapability of demographic variables in predicting environmentally conscious consumer behaviour compelled researchers to search for alternate indicators. Further research in the area have identified variables like environmental knowledge, attitudes, personality, personal intentions and involvement, cultural values and perceived consumer effectiveness [23]-[32].

Examples of studies include research conducted by Clarke [33] in two New York supermarkets examined the effect of environmental knowledge on consumers' attitude, motivation and purchase intention. The results indicated that environmental knowledge had modestly influenced consumers' environmental behaviour. Chan [12] had surveyed 549 Chinese consumers to examine the hypothesized relationships among environmental knowledge, affect, intention and behaviour and compared it with American consumers. Chan and Lau [34] included the variable of cultural values along with knowledge and affect while testing the relationships and effect on consumer behaviour. Several studies concluded that consumer's concern/attitudes and responses to environmental issues are a function of their belief that they can positively contribute to overcoming such issues. This belief is referred to as perceived consumer effectiveness and is positively correlated with environmentally concerned consumer behaviour [29].

III. THE ENVIRONMENTALLY CONCERNED CONSUMER

To some extent, consumers' concern to environment can be understood through the analysis of purchase decisions they make. In the late 1960s when the first wave of enthusiasm for environmentalism hit the society, the then environmentally conscious consumer believed that the best way to solve environmental problems is to reduce the consumption level. Hence, being environmentally concerned and being a consumerist was considered 'mutually exclusive'. In the late 1970s and

80s the environmental concern revolved around just pollution control and efficient use of energy and 'real green issues' were not much of a consumer concern [35]. The perspective has changed in the recent years when consumers began searching for ways to make their usual purchases environment friendly rather than cutting down on their consumption. This is evident from surveys conducted by market research organizations in the 1980s. A market and opinion research international poll in 1989 revealed that the proportion of consumers buying their products based on 'environmental considerations' has gone up from nineteen percent to forty two percent in less than a year [36]. Greendex third edition [37], a study which conducted surveys in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, United States, France, Spain, Germany, UK, Hungary, Sweden, Russia, South Korea, India, Japan and China found that consumers are increasingly becoming environmentally concerned and this is reflected in their consumer preferences. Consumers who are environmentally concerned make more green decisions when it comes to purchasing than those who are not that concerned about the environment and hence it can be envisaged that level of environmental consciousness is more closely related to purchasing behaviour than socio-demographic variables. This can be considered as the beginning of 'real green consumerism'. Hailes [38] describes a green consumer as one who associates the deed of purchasing or consuming products with the possibility of acting in accordance with ecological protection.

There have been many attempts in the past to conceptualize the 'environmentally conscious' construct in diverse disciplines including marketing [39]-[42], environmental studies [43]-[44], psychology [45]-[46], [26], sociology [47]-[48], and business research [49] whereby different instruments were developed and used to measure environmental consciousness, incorporating diverse environmental issues.

Environmental attitudes are being discussed widely and extensive research has been undertaken in this area. Dunlap and Van Liere [50] in their work 'Environmental concern: A bibliography of empirical studies and brief appraisal of the literature', has listed approximately three hundred studies on environmental attitudes. Attitude which is intangible in nature, is a hypothetical construct about a mental state which is inferred from verbal reports and behavioural observation and hence attitudes are very slippery in nature [51]. Attitudes have an object and here, it is the environment. 'Environment' is very ambiguous as a respondent may have differing attitudes about specific objects in the environment. To make an attitude survey valid, environmental attitude object and sub object should be clearly specified [50].

Attitude basically has two components; cognitive aspect and emotional dimension. Cognitive aspect encompasses the dispassionate facts and beliefs which are based on knowledge. When an emotional attachment is exhibited to the object, it can be called affect. The relationship of environmental knowledge and behaviour is debatable [52]. While studies undertaken by Maloney

and Ward [26], Schahn and Holzer [53] and Muller and Taylor [54] shows that environmental knowledge have little impact on environment friendly behaviour; Disputo [24] has found a positive influence between the same. But in the case of environmental affect and behaviour, research has shown more consistent positive association [24]. Loundsbury and Tournatzky [46] found a strong relationship between attitude and behaviour. Interesting fact to note is that, environmental knowledge is not a necessity to exhibit strong environmental affect as people with not much environmental knowledge still show strong emotional attachment [55]. Synodinos [56] concluded that environmental attitude is independent of knowledge as no significant correlation was found between both. On the other hand, studies conducted by Cohen [57] shows that increased knowledge level may influence attitudes positively. Students who were given more environmental knowledge displayed different attitudes than students in the control group [57].

An analysis of literature pertaining to the reasons for this equivocation of research findings identified different explanations. Prominent among them were inappropriate sampling [58], flawed methodologies and measurement specificity [23]. The time period in which the research was undertaken might have also influenced the outcome of the study. Most of the research in this area was conducted in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, when very few consumers were environmentally conscious [58]. Another reason for equivocation can be attributed to inconsistent constructs of environmental knowledge and attitude. This remains a complex issue due to the innate difficulty in developing objective knowledge and attitude scales. Modified scales, taking into consideration changed context, has proved to be more reliable than the scales developed during the 1970s [34]. Environmentally conscious behaviour assessed for specific product lines may vary from general environmentally conscious behaviour as specific knowledge may influence behaviour more than abstract knowledge [6],[53].

IV. NEW THOUGHTS

Standardizing the profile of an environmentally concerned consumer is extremely difficult. Consumers need not be environmentally literate to be environmentally concerned. On the other hand, mere purchasing of 'green products' does not mean that the consumer is environmentally concerned. Peattie [59] pointed out that people may buy organically grown food not only because they are concerned about environment but of health concern or simply the better taste of organic foods. The price premium of environment friendly products and non-availability can deter consumer from purchasing such products but they may be making significant environmental contribution by other means such as wise use of product, maintenance and proper disposal or even delaying or avoiding the purchase decision.

The level of consumer's confidence in the environmental benefits achieved by making a green purchase plays a crucial role in purchase behaviour. Even

if the consumer possesses high environmental knowledge, the scepticism about the firm's environmental claims can negatively affect the purchase intentions [60].

Prakash [61] looked at the whole scenario from a different viewpoint. He applied Herzberg's theory of work motivation to green consumer behaviour and stated that understanding whether consumers view green attributes of firm/product as motivating factors (which induces the consumers to purchase the given product) or hygiene factors (which just prevented dissatisfaction, that is their absence may bother consumers but the demand may not increase with the improvement of green factors). If consumer favours green firms or green products than normal products and if they are willing to take extra efforts (like searching for it, paying more), the green policies or the green products are considered as motivating factors. The managerial implication here is to ensure that the firm/products are environmentally superior to their competitors. If the consumers are not bothered much about green aspects of specific firms/products but penalizes those firms that violate environmental rules and regulations or pollute environment, then greenness is a hygiene factor. In this case, managerial attention should be on complying with environmental laws and regulations and minimal green initiatives to keep up the image [61].

Even though the environmental consumer behaviour is extensively researched, it was evident that all consumers were not willing to sacrifice personal well-being to a large extent, for a sustainable environment [62]. This point out the role corporate world could play in influencing pro-environmental consumer behaviour. More and more business organisations have started realizing that green initiatives are no more seen as a strain on profitability but a positive contributor to financial performance, if transformed it into a competitive advantage [63]-[64].

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