

An examination of the relative roles played by consumer behaviour settings and levels of involvement in determining environmental behaviour

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Abstract

It is well documented that if environmental degradation is to be halted then pro-environmental activities need to be put in place now. This requires the participation of consumers (C), marketers (M) and policy-makers (in this case, the local council (LC)). An examination of the environmental portfolios of LCs and Ms indicates a noticeable increase in behavioural activity which has led to an improvement in their environmental provision. This includes services ranging from recycling to providing information on environmental issues. However, empirical evidence indicates that consumers may have either inadequate or inappropriate knowledge about environmental issues which may have led to low involvement levels and consequently limited behaviour. It may therefore be necessary to distinguish between cognitions that are affected under high or low involvement situations. The involvement levels, however, may be mediated by the consumer behaviour settings (CBS). Using the Behavioural Perspective Model the study observes the impact of CBS and involvement on environmental behaviour. The results indicate that in the low involvement condition CBS has a crucial role to play whereas in the high involvement situation its role may not be significant.

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1. Introduction

The last decade witnessed a slow progression towards sustainable development. During the same period the world population increased to 6.25 billion and carbon dioxide emissions went up by a tenth (The Independent, 2002). Conferences dealing with environmental issues held over a period of 10 years have, however, been successful in changing attitudes worldwide thus leading to a consensus amongst participating nations that more than voluntary effort is required for any positive change to occur (The Independent, 2001). It is evident that awareness regarding environmental issues is on the increase. The post-developmental phase in the west reflects a shift towards pro-environmental behaviour: 82% of consumers within the UK believe the environment to be a problem which is an ‘immediate and

urgent’ issue (Dembokowski and Hanmer-Lloyd, 1997). Pro-environmental behaviour has largely been reflected through two avenues of action: either by reducing or by recovering waste. Translated into behavioural action this involves the purchasing of environmentally friendly products and the recycling of newspapers and bottles (Cone and Hayes, 1984; Marketing, 1992). Although environmental awareness is on the increase, the relevant market is still very small (Troy, 1994). Peattie (1995) refers to this phenomenon as the over-reporting of environmental concern. Environmental behaviour has been seen as ‘pathetically low, partial and fragmented’ (Schlegelmilch et al., 1994). In a comprehensive review of public opinion data, Dunlap (1997) describes environmental behaviour as being limited (see Brown and Hencke, 2002). For instance the UK recycles only 11% of its waste and therefore lags far behind other European countries, for example, Germany and Austria who recycle 48% and 64% of their waste, respectively (BBC News (27/11/02), 2002).

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1.1. Background

Environmental behaviour is an element of the environmental process which requires the participation of both private and the service sectors. Whilst the Government holds overall authority for environmental issues, the responsibility for the implementation of initiatives is shared by several: the local councils (LCs), the customers, the marketers (Ms), the re-processors and the manufacturers, each of whom make contributions at various stages of the process.

This investigation focuses on the service sector by considering the pro-environmental behaviour of consumers. The role of involvement and consumer behaviour settings (CBS) as proposed by the Behavioural Perspective Model are considered here as explanatory variables in the context of environmental behaviour. A link between knowledge, involvement and behaviour is initially discussed to highlight the current situation regarding environmental behaviour. Fig. 1 presents the framework within which the current literature is reviewed. It summarises the current state of affairs. With reference to the two avenues of action mentioned earlier, i.e. recycling and pro-environmental buying behaviour, a discussion of the environmental action undertaken by the LCs and Ms will be useful.

Encouraged by the increasing popularity of environmentally friendly purchases, a large number of organisations have subscribed to the environmental theme by adopting either one or all three Rs namely recycling, reducing and reusing, without providing any justification regarding their ‘greenness’ (CBI, 1993; Prothero and McDonagh, 1992). Peattie and Charter (1997) allude to this issue when they pose the question, “What makes a product green?” Organisations who consider themselves environmentally aware “rarely give specific practical guidance” (Hooper and Rocca, 1991; McCloskey and Smith, 1997). That may be because organisations are unclear about the nature of information needed by consumers; research to date has provided

an unreliable profile of pro-environmental behaviour. The quest to understand environmental behaviour has led to an array of academic studies conceptualising behaviour, using a host of demographic and personality variables (Buttel and Flynn, 1978; Borden and Francis, 1978; Kinnear et al., 1974; Schann and Holzer, 1990; Van Liere and Dunlap, 1981). Whilst individually these studies may be considered to be significant formative elements, collectively they have not been successful in providing reliable information “regarding the characteristics of this consumer type” (Antil, 1984). It is evident in the existing literature not only that there is very little consistency in the terminology used to describe the environment but also that the measures used by researchers to probe the relevant behaviour have varying underlying considerations (Acrury, 1990; McDonagh and Prothero, 1997; Schlegelmilch et al., 1994).

As part of the service industry, service providers such as LCs and Ms may be seen as ‘the local stewards’ for their immediate environment and, as such, key facilitators of environmental knowledge. It is within their remit to ensure that their customers are well informed of the green provisions and of initiatives within the area (see Acrury, 1990). The absence of any prudent explanation by service providers has led to a great deal of confusion and suspicion amongst consumers (Economist, 1990; The Independent, 1994; Kinnear et al., 1974; Bhate and Lawler, 1997; Stisser, 1994). Consumers have had to use their own devices to clarify the extent of green claims which may have led to the accumulation of semantic knowledge (Engel et al., 1994). Knowledge about environmental issues and ways to implement pro-environmental action may be seen as a precursor to behaviour. A positive relationship has been reported by investigations which considered the link between the two variables (Maloney and Ward, 1973; Arbuthnot, 1977; Acrury, 1990). Hines et al. (1987) in their meta analysis conclude “that those individuals with greater knowledge of environmental issues and/or knowledge of how to take action on those issues were more likely to have reported engaging in responsible environmental behaviours than those who did not possess this knowledge”. An evaluation of the current situation indicates that the knowledge transfer process may lack flow and clarity as far as consumers are concerned. In addition, LCs and Ms may not have a clear understanding of what public requirements are thereby creating a gap between knowledge and involvement. Misconceptions about environmental knowledge may have led to “—a lack of involvement on the part of respondents, resulting in a low correlation between involvement and buying behaviour” (Bhate and Lawler, 1997; Bhate, 2002). Consequently despite its relevance the “public knowledge remains at an alarmingly low level” (Acrury et al., 1987; Acrury, 1990).

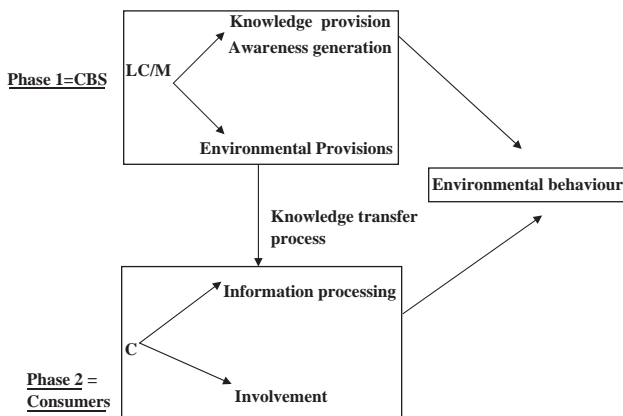


Fig. 1. The current situation.

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