Values influencing sustainable consumption behaviour: Exploring the contextual relationship☆

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1. Introduction

Some researchers view sustainable consumption behaviour as an act of voluntary simplicity or anti-consumption (Shaw & Moraes, 2009; Black, 2010) whereas others define it as the adoption of green lifestyle practices (e.g. Gilg, Barr, & Ford, 2005). Diverse views and explanations make sustainable consumption behaviour a complex phenomenon to explain and predict. Some marketers and policy makers have stressed the need to understand social and institutional actions that may encourage the progress of environment-friendly behaviour among consumers (Vlek & Steg, 2007; Phipps, Ozanne, Weaver, et al., 2013). Others have proposed an exploration of the role of personal values in influencing sustainable behaviour (Thøgersen & Olander, 2002; Grunert & Juhl, 1995; Sener and Hazer, 2008). The important question, therefore, is whether consumers adopt sustainable consumption behaviour due to intrinsic motivation or because of social desirability or both? The extant literature is ambiguous in answering this question. This paper explores the variations in the influence of different kinds of values on different categories of sustainable consumption behaviour.

According to Zukin and Maguire (2004), consumption is a social, cultural and economic process of choosing goods. It enables individuals to form and express their identity. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) conducted a study to show that the experiential processes that focus on the symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic nature of buying behaviour are important components of consumption. Consumption decisions are therefore likely to be influenced by specific values and beliefs of individuals. Every culture has some unique beliefs, values and practices, resulting in varied consumption behaviours.

This study conducted in India is specifically of interest because traditional and religious beliefs in India have recognized the importance of the relationship between man and nature and have advocated people's responsibility towards nature and society (Kala & Sharma, 2010). According to the Advaita philosophy the same 'atman' (soul) is present inside everyone, including nature (Ranganathana, 1995, p. 83). A better understanding of Indian philosophy may lead to a solution for the current ecological problems of the world.

In this study, we have employed a framework called the Holistic Values Survey (HVS) (Sharma, 2015), an extension of Schwartz's values. Although most researchers refer to the Schwartz Values Scale (SVS) (1994) in diverse contexts in cross-cultural value studies (Smith &
Effectiveness (PCE) on the environmental attitude found the moderating impact of an environmental attitude minimal. Consumption (1994) de...

The Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption (1994) de...

2. Theoretical development and hypotheses

This research makes multiple notable contributions to the literature. In the past two decades many researchers who had examined the impact of cross-cultural values on consumption behaviour had mostly used the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS) (1994) and the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ) to measure values. There is, however, a need to incorporate culture specific aspects of values for accurate results. We have used the more relevant Holistic Values Scale (HVS) which adds Indian culture specific values, extending the Schwartz Values Scale and thus stretches the applicability of the values scale. We found that in addition to the biospheric values (identified by Stern & Dietz, 1994), many non-biospheric values such as compassion, acceptance, universalism, and tradition, are also instrumental in guiding people’s sustainable consumption behaviour. Importantly, we have demonstrated that the strength of the values - sustainable consumption behaviour relationship varies depending on the level of sustainable consumption behaviour. There are three levels of sustainable consumption behaviour identified in the study, ‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’, which represent the amount of effort involved in the adoption of corresponding sustainable consumption behaviours.

Second, this study examined the moderating role of a theoretically relevant construct, ‘environmental attitude’, in the values - sustainable consumption behaviour relationship. We found that attitude is likely to moderate the relationship more for a certain set of values than for others. More specifically, in the sustainable consumption context, we found the moderating impact of an environmental attitude minimal when values that impact sustainable consumption behaviour are orientated towards others, while it was maximum when values were orientated towards the self.

Finally, we assessed the moderating impact of Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE) on the environmental attitude - sustainable consumption behaviour relationship. Literature establishes the moderating variable of PCE (Berger & Corbin, 1992); but we have demonstrated that the moderation effect of PCE is behaviour specific. We have clearly shown that PCE moderates the attitude-behaviour relationship only in the case of higher level sustainable consumption behaviour and not otherwise.

The next section explains sustainable consumption behaviour and briefly reviews the current understanding of the values-sustainable consumption behaviour relationship in literature. We then propose our hypotheses and explain the methodology used to conduct this empirical study and present the study results. Finally, we discuss our findings and present the scope for further research.

2.1. Conceptualization of values

The term ‘values’ has been developed upon in several disciplines including economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy and anthropology, long before its importance in understanding consumer behaviour was realized in marketing (Vinson, Scott, & Lamont, 1977). Schwartz summed up the conceptualization of the term ‘values’ in literature as ‘the concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviours that transcend specific situations, guide selection or evaluation of behaviour and events and are ordered by relative importance’ (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001), where they adjust their values to fit into the context of consumption. The context is characterised by both culture as well as the consumption. Value systems of people in different cultures are influenced by society, religion and belief systems, which determine the reasons for which people engage in sustainable consumption behaviour. Minton, Kahle, and Kim (2015) examined the link between religion and sustainable behavioural patterns and found that Buddhists are more likely to participate in sustainable behaviours than others.

Values in different cultures differ to a large extent because of cultural dissimilarities, social systems, social class, gender, occupation, education, religion, and political orientation (Rokeach, 1973). ‘The variations in individuals’ personal, societal, and cultural experiences generate value differences, as well as the stability of values and value systems’ (Xiao & Kim, 2009). We selected India as the cultural context of this paper because we found Indian culture to be exceptionally rich spiritually. ‘India’s ancient culture, rich in spiritual culture is unmatched by any other culture in the world and its value system which is based on, and aims at, direct realization of the ultimate reality, holds great promise for the future welfare of the humanity’ (Bhajananda, 1996, p. 30). Ranganathananda (1995, p. 160) also emphasized that the strong point of Indian tradition is its vision of the spiritual dimension of human values and personality. The exploration of Indian values that profess an enduring spiritual, intellectual and cultural foundation for an environment friendly value system and a balanced sustainable lifestyle (Kala & Sharma, 2010) may provide valuable insights in the domain of sustainable consumption behaviour.
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