



Value-Action Gap Towards Green Consumer Behavior: A Theoretical Review and Analysis

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Abstract

Marketing contributes to the global environmental issues such as global warming, environmental pollution, rapid depletion of natural resources and decrease in biological diversity which is caused by consumption and overconsumption of product. Hence, there is an urgent need to promote green consumption behaviour, which would certainly help in maintaining the sustainability of environment. There is currently a challenging environment for environmentally friendly consumer products. However, promoting awareness on green product consumption does not guarantee the purchasing of green products. Present research shows that there is an increased sensitivity towards green consumption and consumers are willing to pay more for green products. But, there is also considerable evidence of a gap between value and action. Consumers are not actually buying green products they claim when polled. This discrepancy between verbal and actual commitment towards environmental behavior is thought to have attenuated the effectiveness of many environmental policy and measures.

This conceptual paper provides a review of the literature regarding the value-action gap in environmental consumerism. Accordingly, this article examines the work that has been undertaken by a range of researchers from a variety of disciplines examining the links between environmental attitudes and behaviour. Previous researches have focused more on two moderators: One, the level of consumer involvement and second, the perceived consumer effectiveness under which the attitude-behavior relationship might be strengthened. This paper highlights four causal variables which play a significant role in determining the level of consumer involvement. An analysis of these causal variables will help us understanding the value-action gap.

Key Words: Green consumer behaviour, value-action gap, environmental friendly products, environmental literacy, personal contribution, personal-relevance, and self-identity.

1. Introduction

It has long been assumed that attitude is predictive of personal behavior (Armitage & Christian 2003). However, as more research was carried out, social psychologists began to investigate the potential moderators and mediators of the attitude–behavior relation (Armitage & Christian 2003). The structure and the strength of personal attitudes are such moderators (Armitage & Christian 2003, O’Riordan 1981, Guagnano and others 1995, Hallin 1995, Baron & Byrne 1997). However, not all kinds of attitude are equally useful for predicting behavioral commitment. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) warned against the use of global attitudes to predict specific actions. In this regard, Weigel and others (1974) found that behavioral commitment exhibited varying degrees of correlation with attitudinal variables that had different degrees of specificity with the behavior in question: The more specific the attitude measured, the stronger would be its correlation with behavioural commitment. In addition, others found that attitudes were generally more predictive of behavior if they were accessible in memory (Kokkinaki & Lunt 1998) or personally involving (Thomsen and others 1995). These research findings have formed the analytic backbone of environmental behavior research. Subsequently, many studies on environmental attitude and behavior have been founded on the attitude–behavior relation and the investigation of the potential moderators of this relation.

2. Profile of Green Consumer

A review of literature in the area of environmental consumerism revealed a bulk of research directed towards building a descriptive profile of the green consumer by using geographic (Samdahl and Robertson, 1989), cultural (Webster, 1975), personality (Kinnear et al. 1974) and a variety of socio-demographic measures. However, despite in-depth investigation and popular belief, socio-demographic variables have proven to be poor predictors of environmentally responsible behaviors (Kinnear et al. 1974; Weigel 1977; Antil 1984a; Balderjahn 1988; Samdahl and Robertson 1989; Roberts 1996). Though there is moderate support that suggests a significant correlation between gender, age income, location and environmentally responsible behavior (Tognacci et al. 1972; Buttel and Flinn 1978) compared to socio-demographic variables, personality traits (such as tolerance, understanding and harm avoidance) were found to be significant predictors of environmentally responsible behaviours (Kinnear et al. 1974; Arbuthnot 1977; Borden and Francis 1978; Antil 1984a). In other words, those who were more open to new ideas (tolerance) with a strong desire to know how things work (understanding) and is concerned about being harmed by pollution would be more concerned about the environment. Despite the paucity of dependable data that supports the use of socio-economic variables as an effective way to profile the green consumers, organizations such as The Roper Starch Worldwide continue to segment the U.S. consumer market into five environmental segments: true blue greens, greenback greens, sprouts, grouzers and basic browns. Another lifestyle segmentation classification is the use of three distinct groups, planet passionate, health fanatics and animal lovers (J. Ottman Consulting, Inc., 1995).

3. Understanding & Explaining the Environmental Behaviour

Compounding the above challenge (difficulty to accurately profile the environmentally conscious consumer segment) for green marketers, researchers have discovered a low degree of correlation between pro-environmental attitude and environmentally responsible behavior (Wagner 1997). In other words, individuals exhibit positive attitudes towards the environment but fail to execute these attitudes by actually engaging in environmentally responsible behaviors, i.e., purchasing green products. In one of the earliest studies on linking buying behavior with attitude toward the environment, Simmons Market Research Bureau (1991) found that U.S. consumer to not follow

through and buy products they report to prefer. Research suggests that while sociodemographic and psychographic variables are significantly correlated with the verbal expression of concern about environmental issues (attitude), these variables share no or very weak relationships with environmentally relevant actions, i.e. environmental consumerism (Weigel 1977). Needless to say, there is an urgent need to focus on identifying the correlates and determinants of environmentally relevant behaviours rather than environmental attitudes (Endo and Neilsen 1974).

A general acknowledgement of the past research proposes that cognitive factors and attitudes, if considered alone, could not adequately explain environmental action. For instance, Monroe (1993) and Hwang and others (2000) argued that possessing environmental knowledge did not guarantee positive environmental behavior. In contrast, Kempton and others (1995) found that even people having a low level of environmental literacy can be substantially involved in environmental action. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) substantiated the missing link, arguing that the intention to carry out a specific action must be present for that action to be carried out. Having such an intention would reflect a person's (environmental) world views and beliefs, and these would also delineate that person's evaluation of the possible consequences of particular environmental actions (Blake 1999). Therefore, not only will it matter if a person is sceptical about a government's sincerity when it adopts an environmental policy measure (Hinchliffe 1996), but it is also generally the case that a negative and pessimistic person will have a weak intention to take environmental action. An example of environmental pessimism is the "trivial personal contribution" argument where an individual believes that their own environmental action will have little effect (Blake 1999) and therefore do not adopt relevant pro-environmental behavior.

De Young (1990) and Wang and others (1997) were unable to establish a link between the attitude toward recycling and actual participation in recycling schemes because, as others have pointed out, external or situational constraints, including sociodemographic factors, were at work (O'Riordan 1981, Guagnano and others 1995, Hallin 1995, Baron & Byrne 1997, Barr 2006, Henion 1976). One such moderator for environmental behavior is education. Researchers have shown that good education, together with personal traits, enhance environmental knowledge and pro-environmental behavior in a consistent way (Jones & Dunlap 1992). In this regard, Chung and Lo (2004) found that senior school leavers and university graduates tend to create less litter. Venkata swamy and others (2000) concluded in their study on recycling practice in Sweden that the propensity to source separate waste would increase if the agent had more than an elementary school education. It is not surprising then that there is a general impression that college students are more receptive to the idea of responsible waste management or environmental activities (Anonymous 1993, Zezima 2005, Bogo 1999). Other socioeconomic situational constraints can also be influential. People living in rich communities as well as older persons are found to be more active in waste recycling (Jacobs and others 1984, Mohai & Twight 1987, Vining & Ebreo 1990). Higher socioeconomic status has also been found to be correlated with a higher willingness to pay for air-quality improvement (Zeidner & Shechter 1988).

Other situational variables, such as the bystander and the "we-ness" effects, are also thought to affect environmental action. The bystander effect refers to the "propensity of the observers to dilute or dissolve their own responsibility for helping because of the presence of others who presumably can render assistance instead." "We-ness" is a form of group identification wherein a person feels a behavioral congruence with others (Granzin & Olsen 1991). Studies have shown that pro-environmental action decreases when an agent recognizes that there are other potentially helping agents (Dietz & Black 1985/ 1986), whereas "we-ness" has been linked positively to an environmental

helping tendency (Granzin & Olsen 1991). The model devised to explain environmental behavior has become increasingly complex as a result of the inadequacies of earlier theories, but there is a consensus that three groups of factors are involved in determining environmental behavior, namely cognitive, attitudinal (or value-based), and situational. This model on environmental action is hereafter referred to here as the “General Value-Action Model.”

4. Review of Literature

Living in the 21st century has brought a new phase of sustainability challenge by rigid and sceptical to balance the economic development and natural environment at the same time (Lo & Siah, 2016) which could be seen by its bad effect on today environmental problem such as global warming, environmental pollution, rapid depletion of natural resource and decrease in biological diversity (Cankaya & Sezen, 2019). The interdependency between ecology and marketing has placed the environmental studies gradually within social studies (Martin & Ferreira, 2010; Papadas, Avlonitis & Carrigan, 2017) since, marketing is partially contributing to the global environmental problems through consumption and overconsumption (Polonsky, 2011). However, green marketing can also become a part of the solution, if consumers agree to practise green consumption and accept a green product on their choices to decrease the environmental footprint, because the responsibility of business is to focus on fulfilling consumer needs in market (Martinez, 2015; Narula & Desore, 2016).

While it is difficult to understand the size of the green consumer segment, marketing managers realize that environmental issues are important to some consumer segments and this translates into decisions about product offerings and pricing tactics (Osterhus, 1997). It is often difficult for researchers to measure actual behavior thus attitude measurements are hoped to predict behavior. Notwithstanding the substantial green awareness and green consumption of green product among consumers (Rahbar & Wahid, 2011; Park & Lin, 2018) still, consumers holding positive attitude for green products cannot guarantee them with purchasing, namely “green attitude - behaviour gap” or “green gap” (Park & Lin, 2018; King, 2019). This could be seen by the actual demand of green products, which is unfavourable and lead to the low of green current market share which approximately 1 until 6 percent and only 15 percent of them considered as actual green consumer in term of green decision making (Weisstein, Asgan & Shir, 2014; Barbarossa & Pastore, 2015). Through previous literature review, this article is an attempt to understand and overcome the Attitude/value – Behaviour/action gap towards green purchase behaviour.

This paper revolves around a specific environmental conscious behavior, i.e., *environmental consumerism or green buying*. Environmental consumerism is defined as a consumer’s purchase behavior influenced by environmental concerns (Shrum et al. 1995) to seek products and services with minimal impact on the environment (Mainieri et al. 1997). Simply, it translates into consumption behaviors such as purchase of green products and services (Easterling et al. 1995), such as purchasing products made from recycled paper.

5. Environmental Value-Action Gap

For marketers of green products, the gap between pro-environmental attitudes/value and green purchase behavior/action of the green consumer segment is a daunting challenge. An attitude is defined as “an enduring set of beliefs about an object that predisposes people to behave in particular way toward the object” (Weigel 1983, p. 257). Theory in the area of consumer attitude argues that individuals behave in ways consistent with their attitudes. However, research in the area has shown both positive relationships between attitude toward the environment and

behavior (Arbuthnot 1977; Kellgren and Wood, 1986) as well as weak relationships (Wicker, 1969; Webster, 1975; Manieri et al, 1997, Tanner and Kast, 2003). Laroche, Bergeron and Barbaro-Forleo (2001) found a positive relationship between attitudes and willingness to spend more for green products when it was convenient to behave in an environmental favourable manner. This attitude-behavior gap has been attributed to: low correlations among environmental behaviors, different levels of specificity in the attitude-behavior measures, effects of external variables and lack of measurement reliability and validity (Mainieri et al. 1997).

Although a profusion of variables is used in the predictions of behavior, a conspicuous discrepancy is found between the prediction of intention and that of behavior in various contexts, and this is known as the value-action gap (see LaPiere 1934, Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). Not only is this gap a challenge to behavioral scientists, but also the discrepancy between verbal and actual commitment to waste recycling and environmental behavior has actually attenuated the effectiveness of many environmental policies and measures. For this reason, it is important to examine why and in what form the gap exists. However, studies examining the environmental value-action gap have been largely based on matching certain environmental values with an indirect measurement of behavior, namely self-reported environmental behavior (see for instance, Blake 1999; other references mentioned in this section; and the environmental attitudes and behaviors of the Hong Kong public. Therefore, there is a lack of solid evidence on the true size of such a gap.

Research has shown that pro-environmental behaviours are not significantly correlated (Tracy and Oskamp 1983-84) where an individual who performs one type of such behavior e.g. carpooling is also likely to engage in other similar behaviours such as recycling. Lack of measurement specificity between attitude and behavior suggests that the inconsistency exists as a result of researchers failing to measure behavior specific attitude instead focusing on a generalized view of environmental attitude (Gardner and Stern, 1996; Manieri et al., 1997) and behavior. Therefore, measuring attitudes towards a highly specific object or behavior will predict that highly specific behavior (Heberlein et al. 1976, Weigel et al. 1974). Personal (knowledge, motivation or attitudes) and situational (social norms, other attractive choices or economic constraints) factors may also confound the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior (Mainieri et al. 1997). It has been suggested that consumers are ambivalent (Shrum, McCarty and Lowrey, 1995) and may be confused on how to put their intentions regarding environmental consumerism into practice (Simmons and Widmar, 1990). Mainieri et. al (1997) found that respondents expressing favourable environmental viewpoints did not translate their attitudes into product purchases. As a result, there exists some pessimism regarding the ability of general environmental attitudes to predict purchase behavior (Berger and Corbin, 1992). According to Wicker (1969), attitudes are more likely unrelated or slightly related to overt behavior. Ajzen and Fishbein (1977) argue that by incorporating other external variables such as personal and social norms and matching the specificity of attitude and behavior, the link between attitudes and behavior may be strengthened. Weigel (1983) suggests that examining personal and situational characteristics would offer a more accurate insight into attitude-behavior link in environmental consumerism.

6. General Value-Action Framework

This paper is an attempt to expand on the explanatory framework existent in literature by proposing few but, very significant individual moderating conditions under which attitude - behavior relationship in green buying might be strengthened. We can propose this conceptual framework as 'General Value-Action Framework'. Here,

'Environmental consumerism' is interchangeably used with 'Green consumer. Thus following the lead of Shrum et al. (1995) and Mainieri et al. (1997), we define the green consumer is one whose purchase behavior is influenced by environmental concerns. In taking the above moderator variable approach, the author agrees with Berger and Corbin (1992) "that environmental attitudes may sometimes be poor predictors of behaviours and...seek to specify variables that systematically moderate the attitude behavior relationship" (p.80).

- **Consumer Involvement With the Environmental Issues**

Researchers define involvement as a "causal or motivating variable with a number of consequences on the consumer's purchase and communication variable" (Laurent and Kapferer 1985 p. 42) such as decision making, interest in advertising, brand commitment, frequency of product usage (Laurent and Kapferer 1985; Zaichowsky 1985), shopping enjoyment and social observations of product/brand usage (Mittal and Lee 1989). Following are some significant causal variables determining the level of consumer involvement in a green purchase:

- a) Level of Environmental knowledge / Environmental Literacy*

Monroe (1993) and Hwang and others (2000) argued that possessing environmental knowledge did not guarantee positive environmental behavior. In contrast, Kempton and others (1995) found that even people having a low level of environmental literacy can be substantially involved in environmental action.

- b) Intention to carry out a Specific Action*

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) substantiated the missing link, arguing that the intention to carry out a specific action must be present for that action to be carried out. Having such an intention would reflect a person's (environmental) world views and beliefs, and these would also delineate that person's evaluation of the possible consequences of particular environmental actions (Blake 1999). Therefore, not only will it matter if a person is sceptical about a government's sincerity when it adopts an environmental policy measure (Hinchliffe 1996), but it is also generally the case that a negative and pessimistic person will have a weak intention to take environmental action.

- c) Belief of 'Personal Contribution'*

In determining the attitude-behaviour relationship, an important moderating variable is the belief of 'Personal contribution'. A 'trivial personal contribution' (environmental pessimism) is an argument where an individual believes that their own environmental action will have little effect (Blake 1999) and therefore do not adopt relevant pro-environmental behavior. On the contrary, a strong belief that one can significantly contribute to the green environment will certainly lead to a pro-environmental action, well a case of environmental optimism.

- d) Perceived Personal Relevance*

A common thread among the various definitions of involvement has been to conceptualize the construct in terms of "perceived personal relevance" (Bloch and Richins 1983; Zaichkowsky 1985) where, "a consumer's level of involvement with an object, situation or action is determined by the degree to which s/he perceives that concept to be personally relevant" (p. 211, Celsi and Olson 1988). The level of personal relevance or importance (Mittal 1995)

with an object is represented by the perceived linkage between an individual's needs, goals, and values (self-knowledge) and their product knowledge (attributes and benefits). To the extent that product characteristics are associated with personal goals and values, the consumer will experience strong feelings of personal relevance or involvement with the product. In other words, the more the issue or object becomes integrated with the individual's values, the higher the level of involvement (Mitchell 1979). Therefore, in order to accurately reflect the experiential nature of this construct, Celsi and Olson (1988) suggest the term "felt involvement" and propose that the feeling of personal relevance is an outcome of both individual characteristics and the situational context and is only experienced at certain times and situations.

Other key predictors of involvement are:

- Perceived Importance of the Product or Purchase Situation
- Perceived Risk associated with the Product Purchase
- Product Symbolism and the Hedonic Value of the Product (Laurent and Kapferer 1985) etc.

Research has also differentiated between behavioural and attitudinal involvement (Stone 1984) in an attempt to clear some of the obscurity over the clarity of the involvement concept. A *behavioural* definition of involvement is defined as time and/or intensity of effort expended in the undertaking of behavior with the *attitudinal* concept associated with the ego – a concept comprised of a constellation of attitudes that reflects on the very being of the individual. The proponents of this position (Sherif and Centril 1947) argued that highly involved individuals would be most likely to "take a stand" on an issue. One can realize the high vs. low dichotomy of consumer involvement in the realm of environmental consumerism and it can be argued that a high level of involvement with the environment or a specific environmental issue will bridge the attitude-behavior gap plaguing green products. Therefore, for an individual who is significantly involved with the environmental issue of forest conservation, a product made of recyclable paper will solicit positive attitudes and purchase intent. On the other hand, a low level of involvement with an environmental issue, i.e. water quality protection will not benefit a product that promises to reduce water pollution (e.g. phosphate free laundry detergent) by triggering a positive attitude and purchase intent. A high level of product involvement has been hypothesized to lead to greater perception of attribute differences, perception of greater product importance and greater commitment to brand choice. Thus, an individual who is an advocate and a believer of environmental protection (i.e. experiences a high level of involvement with the environment) will experience low levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency and will be more likely to purchase a "green" product than an individual who is not. Hence, the below mentioned propositions forwarded by Shruti and Denise are endorsed.

P1: Low involvement consumers will display higher levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

P2. High involvement consumers will display higher levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

- **Perceived Consumer Effectiveness**

The perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) variable measures the extent to which a respondent believes that an individual consumer can be effective in pollution abatement by registering responses to scale items such as “I strongly believe that taking mass transit to work would result in a lower ozone level in my area.” The PCE variable was obtained from responses to the following statement in the research by Kinnear et al. (1974): “It is futile for the individual consumer to try to do anything about the pollution.” Berger and Corbin (1992) differentiate PCE from attitude in that the latter represents a summary evaluation of an individual’s beliefs or feelings about an issue, while PCE represents an evaluation of the self in the context of the issue. According to them, an individual may feel very concerned about an environmental issue and at the same time totally helpless in his or her ability to have an impact on the problem through his or her own consumption. These individuals are likely to have high attitude scores but low PCE scores and most likely low scores on measures of environmentally friendly purchases. The following propositions too are well accepted.

P3: Consumer with lower levels of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) will display higher levels of attitude-behavior inconsistency.

P4: Consumers with high levels of perceived consumer effectiveness (PCE) will display higher levels of attitude-behavior consistency.

By combining the above two main moderators in discussion, i.e., the level of involvement (low, high) and the perceived consumer effectiveness (low, high), and the underlying causal variables under each of them, a ‘General Value-Action Model’ can be formulated and empirically tested.

7. Discussion

For managers, this framework provides additional information to help segment the green consumer market. With increasing environmental consciousness, companies need to understand green consumers' behavior by examining factors that influence 'green' purchases. This framework helps managers of green products understand the green consumer by identifying factors that elaborate on the process of environmental consumerism. With demographic and psychographic variables having been proven as being inadequate in profiling the green buying segments in the market, shedding light on personal norms such as PCE and involvement produces invaluable knowledge to help accurately segment this market. An in-depth analysis and identification of the causal variables of the personal norms of consumers will provide a more rational understanding of the value-action gap. Marketers can't expect profitable and desirable responses from green consumers with such inappropriate segmentation entirely based on demographics (i.e. gender and age) and psychographics (i.e. personality and lifestyle). Instead, understanding the role of causal variables of the major moderators will derive a scientific and technical understanding of the value-action gap. Once, this value-action gap is properly understood, then segmenting the market based on a combination of demographic, psychographic and individual characteristics will certainly produce the desired responses and results. Taken collectively, the operation of these variables of the ‘General Value-Action Framework’ will certainly provide some of the reasons for the apparent gap between a willingness to minimise waste and actual action.

Of more substance is the argument relating to how individuals make decisions. There is no doubt that the basic theory of reasoned action is a crude framework of behaviour. However, the key assumption, that there is some link between intention and behaviour, is compelling to social researchers since it provides an avenue by which to examine the difference between rhetoric and reality. Although the framework in Figure 1 maybe processual, it is flexible, in that variables can be added or omitted. Thus, there is an implicit recognition that human behaviour is variable. Fundamental efforts to come out with a broader and general framework to reduce these variances across individuals, is the order of the day.

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