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Short summary

Sustainable consumption is motivated by consumer attitudes but also by what it means to consumers, their social groups, what it communicates about them and their social identities, and by what it enables in the context of everyday social practices. A focus on social practices rather than just individual attitudes when encouraging green choices and behaviours can help to design interventions that capitalise on the more social functions of consumption and therefore have the potential to be more effective. Any consumer intervention will need to be monitored and achieved in tandem with a distribution of responsibility among relevant stakeholders and particularly businesses, by determining regulations and incentives for sustainable commercial activities, and by requiring that businesses make sustainable alternatives available, easy to adopt and accessible to consumers.

Introduction

I am Reader in Marketing and Consumer Research at Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, UK. My area of expertise is sustainable consumption and I have a track record of published research in this field. This submission responds to the call for evidence for the inquiry titled "Mobilising action on climate change and environment: behaviour change." In this document I speak to the terms of reference [TR] focusing particularly on public attitudes and behaviour change.

Environmental sustainability demands that governments, businesses, non-governmental organisations, community groups, as well as consumers work together to develop more sustainable and resilient societies and markets. Proponents of the need to achieve net zero carbon emissions highlight that changing the world by consuming green products is not enough, arguing that to be able to tackle the climate crisis what we really need is to reduce our total carbon emissions across all scales of socio-cultural and economic activity, and not just consumptionⁱ. It is in this context that I address public attitudes towards environmental concerns, the potential for green consumption, its challenges, and relevant implications for business and policymakers.

Consumer Attitudes and Sustainability

Consumers' pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours have progressed considerably in recent years. Latest figures from YouGovⁱⁱ suggest that, during COP 26 in November 2021, 39% of the British public saw environmental issues as one of the top concerns facing the UK, representing a rise of 9% since

October 2021. Further, while often young people are perceived as the group who are most concerned with environmental issues, the same YouGov research suggests that only 35% of people aged 18-24 paid considerable attention to COP 26, versus to 64% of those aged 65 and over.

During the pandemic in the UK, green product sales and local shopping grew significantly, and “sales of meat-free and dairy-free products increased by 25% and 28% respectively in the 12 weeks ending April 2020” for a combination of reasons that include environmental concernsⁱⁱⁱ. UK households now spend about £100 per month attempting to reduce their carbon footprint^{iv}, and UK consumers are also much savvier than previously about the green claims made by products and services brands; the media, watchdog groups and the internet have made it easier for consumers to hold companies to account, and consumer trust in green claims is currently low due to questionable brand claims, driving the Competition and Markets Authority regulators to act^v.

Section Summary and Implications¹

Positive attitudes toward the environment are currently high among a range of demographic groups in the UK and environmental issues are no longer the concern of a niche group of consumers. When communicating with consumers about green issues and behaviours, we need to understand what drives their positive attitudes. Overall assessments of the likely positive and negative outcomes of a specific product choice or behaviour tend to determine consumer attitudes toward a particular product choice or behaviour. Therefore, by highlighting the positive, facts-based outcomes of a sustainable product or behaviour, it is possible to help form positive attitudes toward a green product or behaviour in the minds of consumers^{vi}.

People will expect green claims and information that are truthful and based on evidence, otherwise we risk alienating consumers further through increased consumer scepticism, which according to existing research is detrimental to green brands^{vii} and any attempt to progress towards a green economy. Sustainable, green products have attributes that consumers cannot assess easily because of lack of information, knowledge, expertise and/or the costs associated with looking for reliable information^{viii}. Therefore, consumers want proof that services and products that claim to be green really are what they say they are, and a guarantee – for example, through further labelling, certification and/or increased regulation – that companies are addressing the environmental impacts of their brands. The Competition and Markets Authority is on the right track in terms of regulating and policing deceptive claims; drawing on consumer and business complaints and expanding these regulations to all business sections can enhance what is already being done. These actions have the potential to improve consumer trust and confidence in the green claims made by brands.

¹ TR: What can be learnt from research into consumer attitudes towards climate change, the environment, and the transition towards green products and services?

Individual Attitudes and Choice in the Context of Consuming Sustainably²

Existing consumer research on sustainable consumption offers extensive reviews of literature on attitudes and purchase intentions towards green products and services (see ^{ix} for relevant published papers). Sustainable consumption can be defined as consumption that aims to reduce the resource intensity of production-consumption-disposal systems to minimise environmental harm or protect the environment and involves reducing levels of consumption^x. In addition to buying and consuming less, it can include practices such as buying products and services that are green; making products last longer; repairing, reusing and/or repurposing products to delay disposal; donating products that are no longer needed; and recycling and composting^{xi}. Consumers may engage in one or more of these practices concurrently, and more or less consistently, depending on a range of factors internal and external to the individual.

Initial attempts to progress the sustainable consumption agenda focused on rational individual choice by trying to quantitatively determine a connection between consumers' green attitudes and their purchase intentions, and the factors that may help or hinder pro-environmental consumer choices. For example, it is well known that a consumer's attitudes, subjective perceptions of social norms, and the extent to which the consumer perceives a particular behaviour to be under their control will influence purchasing intentions and actual behaviour^{xii}. In fact, beliefs about 'what is socially normal' are very important when trying to influence people to act sustainably. Researchers have also looked at how a sense of moral obligation^{xiii} to act in pro-environmental ways, and pro-environmental values^{xiv}, can impact sustainable consumption intentions positively. In addition, research examining personal values suggests that consumers who have strong pro-environmental and altruistic values are more motivated to engage in sustainable consumption behaviours that require significant effort^{xv}.

Nevertheless, research on attitudes and values can only explain consumer intention and behaviour to a degree. We know that one of the barriers to consuming sustainably is the alleged value-action or attitude-behaviour gap, which occurs when pro-environmental intentions do not translate into action. To address this gap, researchers have looked at the neutralisation techniques that consumers use to rationalise environmentally inconsistent behaviours^{xvi}, and additional factors to help explain inconsistencies, barriers, and enablers of sustainable consumption behaviour (e.g., the role of emotions, habits, lack of information or confusing information). However, these additional factors still focus mainly on the individual consumer and the psychological influences affecting pro-environmental choices and behaviours, when in fact the gap between intention and behaviour might be determined by factors external to the consumer; factors that are beyond the consumer's control and/or which may be socio-culturally and economically structured into existing consumer behaviour and the marketplace.

² TR: What are the pros/cons and limitations of different frameworks and methods for promoting behaviour change?

Section Summary and Implications

Existing research suggests that green communications about products and interventions seeing behaviour change can continue to focus on people's pro-environmental values, on creating positive attitudes and positive emotions toward sustainable consumption. But we can do better in terms of making it clear to consumers that environmental concerns are now normalised and that taking action to achieve sustainability goals is now normal, as social norms are powerful influencers of behaviour. Further, while creating positive attitudes and norms and providing sufficient and adequate information about desirable choices and behaviours are important, they are insufficient³. We need to consider the wider social contexts and practices in which consumption takes place and create incentives and reduce barriers to sustainable consumption accordingly. Barriers and incentives are sector specific. Nevertheless, an example of incentive might be to reduce a consumer's council tax if they increase their composting and reduce the amount of waste they send to landfill, whereas reducing barriers might involve ensuring that the costs of consuming green are the same or lower than non-green options and ensuring that such products and services are widely available to consumers (i.e., making it convenient and cost-effective for people to buy green alternatives).

Beyond Individual Choice in Sustainable Consumption

There is a need to consider aspects of sustainable consumer behaviour that go beyond rational individual choice and the link between attitudes and intentions. For example, it is well documented in relevant literature that people derive meaning from consumption, and that what consumers buy can have symbolic value and signal something about who they are, their social standing and status^{xvii}. People derive pleasure from consumption practices and consumption can say something about people's social aspirations, their social relationships, and the groups to which they do or do not belong. Consumption in this sense is a form of self-expression and social communication. For example, a consumer might choose to purchase an electric car or solar panels because such products are symbolically connected to green lifestyles and green identities, because people close to them or people in their social groups have these products, and because such a purchase will make them feel good about themselves^{xviii} for doing their part for the environment.

In fact, sustainable consumption needs to be understood as a social practice^{xix}, as it is influenced by socio-cultural norms, technological advances, contexts, and infrastructures that shape and structure consumer behaviour⁴. Social practice approaches to understanding sustainable consumption suggest that all daily

³ TR: What are the main evidence gaps relating to these frameworks and methods, and how might they be addressed?

⁴ TR: What are the main evidence gaps relating to these frameworks and methods, and how might they be addressed?

consumption activities are part of people's shared social practices rather than just the result of isolated, rational, individual choices. Practice approaches to understanding sustainable consumption emphasise the interconnections among the meanings that people derive from performing a behaviour, the competences, and skills that consumers have so that they can perform the behaviour, and the materials (in other words, the objects, the 'stuff') that make a shared social practice possible. For example, driving might involve meanings such as freedom and mobility, being able to perform daily duties such as taking children to school and being able to get to work on time; it requires competences such as passing a written and practical driving test, being able to drive on busy roads; and it requires materials like a car or having access to car rental or car sharing. Social practices are formed and sustained mainly through these three elements and how they are organised, and can emerge, change, and fade if these elements and their interconnections change.

By examining the elements of a practice and their interconnections, it is possible to understand which meanings, materials, and/or competences hinder and/or support sustainable behaviours and choices among consumers. This understanding, in turn, can help to inform sustainable behaviour interventions that reconfigure elements and their relationships in pro-environmental ways. In other words, if we want individuals to act in more environmentally friendly ways, we need to find out how to change meanings, competences and materials in ways that help to achieve sustainability goals.

New research^{xx} suggests that, when social practices are interrupted (e.g. government bans plastic straws, restaurants start offering paper straws, stop offering single use plastic straws), consumers engage in a range of strategies as they attempt to make sense of the new requirements for performing a particular activity (e.g. remember to ask for paper straws at restaurants, stop asking for straws altogether), followed by developing new competences (e.g. know that they need to bring their own durable straws if they are needed for, say, a child, and plan accordingly), and maintaining the new behaviours with more or less speed or ease (e.g. by creating new habits around the use of straws so that they no longer feel they need to ask for them in restaurants). However, these requirements for behaviour change can be unsettling for consumers, disrupting other practices unintentionally and provoking a questioning of where the responsibility lies in ensuring that the marketplace can offer accessible sustainable solutions that are configured in environmentally friendly ways in the first place^{xxi}.

Section Summary and Implications

Sustainable consumption is motivated by what it means to consumers, their social groups, what it communicates about them and their social identities, and by what it enables in the context of everyday social practices. By following a social practices approach and designing sustainability interventions that capitalise on the identity building and more communicative and symbolic social functions of consumption, policymakers can identify and understand social

practice elements in terms of meanings, materials, and competences, and deploy these elements to create interventions that can disrupt, reconfigure, and restabilise specific practice elements to enable more sustainable practices in the future. In doing so, it is important to offer consumers clear guidance around what behaviours and choices are preferable, clarity on how they can implement these new choices and behaviours in their everyday lives, and clarity on the positive feelings and benefits of engaging in these new behaviours. Any consumer intervention will need to be monitored and achieved in tandem with a distribution of responsibility among relevant stakeholders by determining regulations for sustainable commercial activity in ways that foster green social practices among consumers, and by requiring that businesses make sustainable alternatives easy, available, and accessible to consumers⁵ (see ^{xxii}).

What makes social practice approaches relevant to sustainable consumption policymaking is that they focus on the actual shared practices of people via three main elements and how they are organised, rather than on an individual consumer's motivations, attitudes, or decision-making processes. These approaches acknowledge the focus on people's practices but also the wider social forces, structures, organisations, and stakeholders that shape individual consumer behaviour. A social practices perspective would suggest that it would be beneficial for government to tackle behaviour change by simultaneously encouraging sustainable individual choice and social practice, by regulating business practices to ensure that businesses are making sustainable choices available and are not, say, deceiving or making environmentally harmful products appealing options, and by creating incentives and disincentives for both businesses and consumers to encourage a push-pull effect on both sustainable production and consumption⁶.

A final note about the importance of accessibility is warranted⁷. Sustainable consumption has often been criticised for being inaccessible to lower income consumers because green and more durable products tend to be priced at a premium^{xxiii}, for example. As the UK witnesses increasing numbers of people who struggle to make ends meet^{xxiv}; people who suffer from food insecurity^{xxv} and, therefore, a lack of access to the most essential of consumption needs for consumer wellbeing, we cannot expect sustainability to be at the forefront of people's concerns in such circumstances. These issues highlight the importance of tackling poverty and other inequalities alongside the environmental issues we face. In addressing sustainability issues, we need to be very careful that we do not further exacerbate existing social problems by excluding people even further from sustainable practices in governmental attempts to 'do the right thing' for the environment. We need to find solutions that reduce over-reliance on

⁵ TR: How can the Government best set parameters for environmentally responsible business, in support of behaviour change?

⁶ TR: How should the Government consider the balance between, or sequencing of, approaches to behaviour change focused on: encouraging changes to individual behaviour; regulatory approaches focused on individuals and/or businesses which restrict or eliminate choices; and fiscal measures (including taxation)?

⁷ TR: What roles are there for considerations of fairness, individual freedoms, and social responsibilities in the context of behaviour change?

unsustainable materials and modes of production without raising costs for the end consumer because unfortunately poverty is on the rise.

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