Sustainable Consumption and Value Orientations

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Sustainable consumption refers to consumption choices that are made by consumers who are considering environmental, social and/or ethical issues during their purchase decision. When engaging in sustainable consumption, consumers assess whether products are benevolent to the environment, recyclable or conservable, and responsive to social, ecological and ethical concerns.

Personal value orientations capture the importance that individuals attach to certain general values and the extent to which individuals adhere to these values as guiding principles in their lives. Three types of values have been associated with pro-environmental behaviour: egoistic (threats to oneself), social–altruistic (threats to others), and biospheric (threats to nature or the environment).

Keywords: green purchasing ; New Ecological Paradigm ; value orientations ; sustainable consumption ; worldviews ; pro-environmental consumer behaviour

1. Background

Consumers nowadays are more aware of environmental issues than ever before. They have a positive attitude towards environmental protection [1][2] and expect companies to engage in pro-environmental conduct (e.g., [2]). This pro-environmental awareness could also affect their (daily) consumption patterns [3]. Related to this trend, studies have investigated individuals' implicit beliefs about the impact of humanity on the environment [4][5]. Implicit beliefs capture the mental associations of individuals connected to the balance between humanity and nature or, in short, their worldview. It is expected that consumers' worldview on the balance between humanity and environment may interact with their value orientations and therefore may influence the relationship between value orientations and sustainable consumption patterns.

2. Pro-Environmental Consumer Behaviour

The literature has used the terms "green", "sustainable", and "pro-environmental" interchangeably to refer to behaviour of consumers that has a positive impact on the environment [6]. Among others, this behaviour encompasses consumers' attitudes towards green products [7], intention to buy green products [8][7], and actual experience with buying green products [7] or their green purchase behaviour [6][9]. An example of pro-environmental consumer behaviour is when a consumer makes a purchase decision based on his or her assessment of the recycling strategy that can be used for a specific product, or the impact of its ingredients on the environment [10].

Prior research has shed light on the link between pro-environmental consumer behaviour and value orientations in a fragmented way. Some studies have focused on the effect of one specific value orientation, while abstracting from others (e.g., [8]). This approach does not allow for comparing values within one study. Other studies have aggregated all value orientations into one category (e.g., [11]), which again limits the possibility to draw conclusions about separate value orientations. However, other studies have explored the influence of values on intentions (e.g., [12][13]) rather than actual behaviours. Despite addressing different values within one study, the focus is on consumer intentions instead of actual behaviour. In conclusion, all these studies only provide partial explanations for pro-environmental consumer behaviour.

3. Effect of Consumers' Value Orientations on Sustainable Consumption Patterns

Personal value orientations have been central to social sciences in explaining people's motivations and behaviours. For example, based on an empirical study across 44 countries, Schwarz [14] proposed 10 types of basic human values, including self-direction, stimulation, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, security, power, achievement, and hedonism. These values present universal aspects in human nature that motivate behaviour and have been recently

integrated with the theory of planned behaviour (TPB [15]) by Ahmad and colleagues [16] (see also [17]). Values are considered to be relatively stable over time, and they are believed to affect various attitudes, intentions, and behaviours [18]. In a seminal paper, Stern and Dietz [19] theorised that certain value orientations are related to pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. They distinguished egoistic (threats to oneself), social–altruistic (threats to others), and biospheric (threats to nature or the environment) value orientations [19]. Each of these three values is likely to be related to sustainable consumption patterns, including pro-environmental purchasing intentions, behaviours, and experiences as will be explained in the following.

Egoism captures the extent to which individuals are oriented at self-enhancement, maximising their own welfare [20]. Egoism suggests a purely economic rationale (i.e., individuals are motivated by self-interest and try to maximise their own well-being). Such an orientation is likely to be negatively correlated to pro-environmental behaviour because self-enhancement is geared towards attaining immediate individual gains, which generally conflicts with the long-term benefits of pro-environmental behaviour [21][22]. Studies also show that egoism is related to lower willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviour (e.g., not willing to pay taxes (or a price premium) for environmentally friendly products, or not willing to engage in pro-environmental (political) action) [23]. However, the findings in the literature are mixed. Several studies have argued that egoism may be positively related to pro-environmental behaviour, especially in cases when green products are perceived to be healthier or safer than non-green products (e.g., [24][25]). Consumers may have health concerns for themselves or for their close family. An egoistic value orientation could be fuelled by such health concerns. It has been shown that health concern is one of the main factors that drive purchasing intentions of organic food [26]. However, by adopting the narrow definition of egoistic value orientation, we argue that consumers' egoistic value orientations are likely to be negatively related to sustainable consumption patterns, including green purchasing intention, behaviour, and experience.

Altruism refers to the degree to which individuals are concerned for the welfare of others [19][13][20]. When individuals are driven by altruistic values, they feel an emphatic concern for others without pursuing personal benefit [13]. This motivates them to take into account the impact of their actions on other people when deciding on behaving in a pro-environmental way or not [27]. With respect to pro-environmental consumer behaviour, Barbarossa and De Pelsmacker [28] found that green consumers adhere more to altruistic motives than non-green consumers. In a similar vein, it has been shown that altruistic values have an indirect relation to green purchase behaviour [6] and attitude [25]. For example, Wang and colleagues [22] indicated that altruism motivated daily energy-saving behaviours of urban residents in China. In a study about green cosmetics, Pop and colleagues [24] showed that altruism has a positive impact on consumers' attitude towards green cosmetics.

Individuals with a predominantly biospheric value orientation emphasise the importance of the environment and the biosphere [29]. Concerns about threats to nature have been shown to encourage environmental attitudes and feelings of moral obligation to help nature [30]. People engage in pro-environmental behaviours when they empathise with a suffering nature and are feeling protective of nature [30]. Similarly, prior studies have shown that especially altruistic and biospheric values are connected to green consumer behaviour [8][22][23][31]. For example, Nguyen et al. [9] demonstrated that biospheric values encourage active engagement in pro-environmental purchase behaviour by enhancing consumers' attitudes towards environmental protection. Consumers who endorse biospheric values are concerned about the impact of their own consumption pattern, for example, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions [32]. Furthermore, environmental awareness of consumers is related to pro-environmental consumption choices, such as choosing products that are made of recycled constituents and reduce waste [2].

4. The Moderating Role of Worldviews

Consumers are believed to be more aware than ever before about how their consumption patterns may threaten the quality of the environment and sustainable development [2][33][34]. They are increasingly conscious about the potential devastating impact humanity has on the biosphere. In connection to this development, studies have investigated individuals' implicit beliefs about the impact of humanity on the quality of the environment [5][29], or worldview. Worldview taps into the beliefs of individuals about humanity's ability to upset the balance of nature. It assesses individuals' gut feelings and implicit beliefs about the relationship of humanity with nature [5]. Worldviews change only slowly over time, but changes in worldview usually have a large impact on society [35]. People with a pro-environmental worldview have been shown to be more interested in the quality of the environment and also more concerned about global warming [29]. Similarly, people with pro-environmental worldviews tend to undertake action to address environmental problems [29]. These studies assess the direct relationship between pro-environmental implicit beliefs and green behaviour, thereby largely overlooking the interplay between personal values and implicit beliefs.

There is a conceptual difference between personal values and implicit beliefs. Whereas personal values reflect the importance that individuals attach to certain values and they adhere to these as guiding principles in their lives, implicit beliefs capture the mental associations of individuals connected to the degree in which humanity is able to achieve sustainable growth in balance with natural resources [5]. For example, Sadiq, Paul, and Bharti [36] found that dispositional traits had an effect on green consumer behaviour in the sense that “optimistic” consumers engaged more in such behaviours, while “pessimistic” consumers did not.

5. Conclusion

The referenced study (see the bottom of this page) shows that there are many types of “green” consumers. Dichotomous perspectives are insufficient to explain green consumption. When it comes to sustainable consumption patterns, it turns out that consumers show multiple shades of green, in the sense that differences in personal values and implicit beliefs determine a variety of green purchasing patterns.

Evidence of the direct effects of egoism and altruism on green consumer patterns is not convincing, while biospheric value orientations seem to be significantly related to green consumer patterns. When individuals state that personal values, such as preventing pollution, respecting the earth, and protecting the environment, are guiding principles in their lives, then they do indeed show pro-environmental purchasing intentions, behaviour, and experience. Furthermore, it has been found that having a pro-environmental worldview strengthens the positive relationship between biospheric value orientations and green purchase behaviour. In other words, when personal values are in line with implicit beliefs about the environment, the effect on green purchasing patterns is intensified.

Summing up, we can say that an individual’s implicit beliefs have an important impact on the relationship between personal values and green purchasing behaviour and experience. Hence, not all consumers are the same. Their views on the world are of chief importance for the way their personal values are related to their purchase decisions.

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