On the nature of sustainable product choices:
A qualitative study examining college students’ attitudes toward sustainable brands

A research report

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Abstract

Americans, the world’s most voracious consumers\(^1\), claim to have positive attitudes toward both environmentally and socially sustainable products, and many claim that they would purchase these products even if they were more expensive than unsustainable products (O’Rourke, 2005; Creyer & Ross, 1997; Simon, 1995; Roper Organization, 2007). The purchasing behavior of these consumers, however, is not necessarily consistent with their positive attitudes (Guber, 2003). To more fully understand that behavior gap, this qualitative study explores consumer attitudes toward sustainable goods as well as sustainable business practices in order to generate a more nuanced understanding of consumer attitudes toward sustainable products. This consists of identifying how “sustainable brands” and “unsustainable brands” are perceived relative to one another, why consumers would be likely to prefer sustainable brands over unsustainable brands, and what barriers exist to purchasing or preferring sustainable products. I outline the basic structural and affective qualities participants attribute to sustainable and unsustainable brands, and illuminate four barriers to purchasing sustainable products: (1) high price, (2) lack of information, and (3) lack of availability, and (4) concern for capital. To have a concern for capital\(^2\) is to say that while someone may feel positively about purchasing sustainable products and enjoy the concept of sustainable business, they are also worried that operating a sustainable business is antithetical to accumulating capital. I offer policy recommendations designed to diminish the first three barriers to purchasing sustainable products, which may serve to temper the attitudes of consumers toward these products and diminish the persistence of the fourth barrier. These recommendations are designed to encourage growth in the market for sustainable products through consumer demand.

Study Participants: The Early Adopters

I have opted to focus on Northwestern undergraduate students (ages 18-22) as the subject of this research because they are akin to type of person who is likely to care about sustainability today. Because sustainable products tend to be more expensive (McKinsey, 2008), and there is a lot of information that must be evaluated in order to understand and successfully purchase sustainable products, not all people are equally likely to buy or think about these products. Northwestern undergraduates, however, are wealthier and more educated compared to the average citizen of the United States and thus may be relatively more likely or able to purchase sustainable products. Furthermore, sustainability is concerned primarily with the future of the planet, so it is rational for a younger person, like a Northwestern undergraduate student, to be more significantly invested in these ideas than older populations. While it

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\(^1\) In 2000 the per capita consumption of all materials in the United States was 23.7 metric tons, 52% more than the European average (University of Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems, 2009)
\(^2\) In neoclassical economics, capital is one of the factors of production (land, labor, organization, entrepreneurship, and management may be considered others), which are the resources employed to produce goods and services, but are not, themselves, consumed.
would not be irrational for an older person to be concerned with sustainability issues, I contend that the younger person simply has a more vested interest. For all these reasons, Northwestern undergraduate students are suitable subjects for this research. I count them among the “early adopters” of sustainable products, which is to say that they would be relatively more likely/able to purchase (or think about purchasing) sustainable goods than people who are older, less educated or have a lower socio-economic status.

Method

20 Semi-Structured Interviews

To get my interviewees talking about the issue of sustainability as it relates to both social and environmental concerns, I devised a series of (index card) sorting exercises (Appendix A). The first of these exercises were intended to get my interviewees to share what types of brands\(^3\) strike them as sustainable and why (Exercise 1). Next, participants were asked how important specific sustainable business practices\(^4\) were to them (Exercise 2). Finally, I wanted to explore whether the participant would associate/disassociate any of the brands from Exercise 1 with the behaviors he had identified as ‘important’ during Exercise 2 (Exercise 3). Once the interview data was collected, transcribed, and checked for accuracy my advisor and I coded it using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For a visual representation of the concepts, themes and relationships I identified in the interviews see Appendix B.

Results and Discussion of Exercise 1

The Structure of Sustainable Brands: Participants tended to frame brands as “sustainable” if they perceived them to be (1) a small business (2) a business with transparent operations and (3) a business that produces expensive products. The notion of transparent operations was heavily associated with domestic (U.S.) production, local products, and products produced by co-ops.

The Structure of Unsustainable Brands: Participants tended to frame a brand as “unsustainable” if they perceived it to be affiliated with (1) a big business (2) a business with opaque operations and (3) a business that produces cheap products. The notion of opaque operations was heavily

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\(^3\) Brands included: Adidas, American Apparel, Ben & Jerry’s, Chipotle, Chiquita, Haagen Dazs, Kettle Chips, SunChips, Timberland, Urban Outfitters

\(^4\) Business practices included: Employees may organize and bargain collectively, Company is actively working to reduce energy and resource consumption, Company is working to reduce the amount of waste it creates, Company employs independent monitors to oversee overseas production, Company practices environmental stewardship even if the country it operates in lacks environmental regulations, Employees have freedom from forced labor, Company is engaged with the community and supportive of it, Company sponsors job-related education programs for employees, and Company routinely collaborates with non-profit groups
associated with producing goods overseas in areas like China, South America, and Southeast Asia. These factors mirror the perceptions relied upon to distinguish the “sustainable” brands.

Affective Qualities of Sustainable and Unsustainable Brands: Participants were also likely to associate “sustainable” and “unsustainable” brands with different affective qualities. Sustainable brands were characterized as brands from companies with “authentically sustainable business practices” as well as a “concern” for communities, the environment, and their employees. Unsustainable brands, on the other hand, were characterized as brands from companies that had either no sustainable business practices or sustainable claims based on minimal actions and falsely constructed images of sustainability.

Results and Discussion of Exercise 2

Concern for Capital: When participants were asked to sort a series of corporate behaviors associated with sustainability into a hierarchy according to which behaviors the participants believed were most important, the resulting hierarchies reflected a concern for ethical business generally, but less dedication to instituting regulations or spending corporate capital\(^5\) to ensure that ethical business is practiced. Indeed, participants consistently sorted sustainable business behaviors that require companies to adhere to regulations or expend capital toward the bottom of their hierarchies. This is “concern for capital,” or the idea that although a person may feel positively about purchasing sustainable products and enjoy the concept of sustainable business, they are simultaneously worried that operating a sustainable business is antithetical to accumulating capital and thus an inappropriate strategy to prefer. Although primarily theoretical, concern for capital constitutes a significant barrier to purchasing sustainable goods.

Stability = Unsustainability: The companies that my participants identified as superior at generating profit fit well into the “unsustainable” schema identified during the first sorting exercise. Indeed, participants characterized these companies as likely to take advantage of regulatory differences (cheap labor, few environmental regulations) between or within nations in order to capitalize on the imbalance. These attitudes signal a fundamental disconnect in that participants associate unsustainable firms with profit and an opportunity to accumulate monetary wealth for themselves, but they also associate these firms with negative impacts like harming the environment, employees, and the communities. While the presence of a profit-generating firm is good for individuals it may also generate significant harms, which could not be rectified without raising (environmental and labor) standards. According to my respondents, raising standards could make capital likely to flee, which may jeopardize citizens’ chances at prosperity. Indeed, my participants associate economic stability (capital generation)

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\(^5\) These behaviors overwhelmingly included: Employees my organize and bargain collectively, Employees earn a living wage, Company employs independent monitors to oversee overseas production, Company is engaged with the community and supportive of it, Employer sponsors job related education programs for employees, Company practices environmental stewardship even if the country it operates in lacks environmental regulations, and Company routinely collaborates with non-profit groups.
with businesses they identify as unsustainable (big, opaque, cheap goods) and out of a concern for capital are not ready to associate economic stability with sustainable production, no matter how positively they view sustainability.

**Moving from Stability=Unsustainability to Stability=Sustainability:** Although many respondents were positive about sustainable goods and sustainable business practices, and expressed that consumers could convince firms (that seek profit) to produce socially and environmentally sustainable goods by “voting with their dollar” or purchasing a sustainable good in lieu of the unsustainable version of that good. Most respondents agreed, however, that sustainable goods are currently (1) more expensive to produce (for the company), more expensive to purchase (for the consumer), (2) relatively difficult to understand (requiring a intricate knowledge of sustainability), and (3) harder to find (available only at specialty stores, in special aisles, or on the internet). I offer policy recommendations designed to diminish the first three barriers to purchasing sustainable products, which may serve to temper the attitudes of consumers toward these products and diminish the persistence of the fourth barrier, concern for capital. These recommendations are designed to encourage growth in the market for sustainable products through consumer demand.

**Policy Recommendations**

While establishing an international body to levy a global carbon taxes and set global labor standards could affect how costly it is to produce goods unsustainably, this is a very difficult process. In light of the complex issues surrounding global rule setting, perhaps the most appropriate question for a consumer to ask is not “how expensive are sustainable products?” but “how do my purchasing habits affect the global population and environment?”

**Educate the Consumer**

**GoodGuide and other Decision Helping Tools:** One way educate consumers is to teach them about the sustainable product decisions they could potentially make. Mobile phone applications like the GoodGuide provide an inventive way for consumers to directly access complex information regarding the sustainability impacts of the goods they are about to purchase simply by scanning the barcode. The GoodGuide aggregates and analyzes data on both product and company performance and employs a health hazard assessment, an environmental impact assessment, and a social impact assessment to identify major impacts to human health, the environment, and society. Each of these categories is then further analyzed within specific issue areas, such as climate change policies, labor concerns, and product toxicity. Currently, GoodGuide’s database includes over 1,100 base criteria with which they evaluate products and companies (Good Guide, 2010).

Given the well-established notion that a trade-off between effort and accuracy is inherent to human decision making (Payne et al., 1993), an application like this will reduce the effort required to
make sustainable product decisions as well as improve the accuracy of these decisions by giving consumers access to more dependable information in an easy to use format. An application like this does not require consumers to trust the claims on a product’s package or eco-labels\(^6\), although they may choose to. Rather, they will be more able to capitalize on the enormous amount of information available about sustainability in a more objective way, which may enable them to make more accurate sustainable product decisions than they could otherwise.

**Make Sustainable Products More Available**

**Sustainable Product Placement:** Even if consumers have the information they need to buy sustainable products, they are relatively hard to find. An informal survey of 23 retailers in Chicago and in the San Francisco Bay area found that fewer than half sold sustainable products (other than organic foods and CFLs), and among the minority that did sell these products only about 10 percent stocked more than one brand option (McKinsey, 2008). If stores simply stocked more sustainable products (including products produced locally), consumers would suddenly have the opportunity to purchase these products more widely. This could be especially effective if consumers actually understood the social and environmental returns on their purchasing decisions, as I discussed in the last section. Stocking and supporting local products may also help the cause by emphasizing the personal relevance of the products.

**NBC’s Behavior Placement:** Another way to make sustainable products more accessible is to make thinking about them more commonplace. While specific advertisements may not always influence a person to buy a specific product, political scientist Shanto Iyengar argues that the media exercise ‘agenda control,’ which is to say that it has the potential to shape what you think about as well as what you consider important and true. For instance, the prominence of issues in the news media – fear of crime or concern about traffic congestion or worry about the condition of the economy – is correlated with the public’s perception that those issues are important (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Along the lines of agenda control, NBC’s network executives have asked producers of almost every primetime and daytime show to incorporate a green storyline at least once a year since 2007\(^7\). The tactic, according to General Electric (GE), owner of NBC, is called “behavior placement.” It is designed to sway viewers to adopt actions they see modeled in their favorite shows, and it helps sell advertisements to marketers who want to associate their brands with a feel-good, socially aware programming (Chozick, 2010).

\(^6\) Research suggests that there are over 600 eco-labels in use throughout the world (Elperin, 2010). EcoLogo, a consultant on verification, surveyed more than 2,200 North American products and found that more than 98 percent lacked proof to justify their claims (Case, 2008).

\(^7\) In just one week during April 2010 the detectives on "Law and Order" investigated a cash-for-clunkers scam, a nurse on "Mercy" organized a group bike ride, Al Gore made a guest appearance on "30 Rock," and "The Office" turned Dwight Schrute into a cape-wearing superhero obsessed with recycling.
Future Directions for Research

Beyond Early Adopters

To evaluate whether sustainable business practices and purchasing sustainable goods are of concern to groups that do not fit the ‘early adopter’ description it would be interesting to employ this survey methodology to other groups. I recommend exploring the viewpoints of relatively economically disadvantaged populations, elderly populations, and relatively uneducated populations. Applying this survey design to other groups may require some adjustment of the brands used as primers so that the particular group is able to recognize the brand and make judgments about it. In this case it may be helpful for the researcher to be familiar with the population at least through empirical study and/or observational research.

Small Companies & Sustainable Business

Participants consistently noted that small companies have a heightened capacity to operate their business sustainably. Small businesses, however, are often legally exempt from reporting information about their operations, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, transparency can be a very onerous apparatus, and it may not be appropriate for every “mom and pop shop” to spend the time and money it would take to document their business practices. To evaluate whether small businesses deserve to be associated with sustainability, however, I recommend a survey of small businesses in an effort to understand just how sustainable they are. The survey could be administered to small business owners and would ask them to take account of their company’s sustainable business practices, which could be modeled on the eleven sustainable business practices I used in this project.

Situational Primers and Sustainable Consumption

Social science research has continually showed the effects of priming on attitudes and actions. In one study, participants were primed with words related to elderly stereotypes were likely to walk more slowly down the hallway after finishing the experiment than the control group (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). It would be interesting to evaluate whether situational primers might make a consumer more likely to purchase a sustainable product. The study might take place in a grocery store with a pair (or several pairs) of brands, to be displayed next to one another. One of the two products should be marked in some way that distinguishes it as sustainable. Before entering the store to do their shopping, consumers would be primed to think about values related to sustainability; for instance, they may witness a small group of people planting a tree or see some information the reminds them of social instability like a poster about child laborers. Would these positive primers actually affect real life purchasing decisions? Additionally, prices between the sustainable and unsustainable brand could be altered to be either more egalitarian or more differentiated as a method of determining at what cost people would choose the sustainable good in a primed vs. unprimed condition.
Works Cited


Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Sustainability Interview

Instructions: This interview will consist of three separate tasks, which will require you to sort a series of index cards into groups. There are two types of index cards you will interact with: branded cards and behavior cards. The branded cards contain the logo of 10 brands respectively. During step three, up to four of these cards may be brands you reported knowledge of during your online survey. The behavior cards contain sustainable business practices, which are the same corporate behaviors the respondent was asked to rank during the online survey.

Task 1: Please sort these branded cards according to how sustainable you believe them to be. Create three groups: sustainable brands, unsustainable brands, and brands of unknown sustainability. You may have as many or as few cards in each group as you wish, but you must sort all the cards into one of the piles.

Questions about Task 1:
- Will you please say a few sentences about why you sorted each of these branded cards as you did?
- What made you select [insert brand] for the sustainable brand group?
- What made you select [insert brand] for the unsustainable brand group?
- You said you were unfamiliar with the sustainability practices of [insert brand] do you know anything about this brand? Have you ever purchased it?
- I may also ask other questions that attempt to get at why a respondent sorted the brands he did.

Task 2: Please sort these behavior cards according to how important it is to you that a company engages in each of these activities. Behaviors may tie for a position on the scale. If one or more of these behaviors is not important at all to you, please do not include the card in your ranking system.

Questions about Task 2:
- Will you please say a few sentences about why you sorted these behaviors cards the way you did?
- Why did you select [insert behavior(s)] as the most important one(s) for a company to engage in?
- Why did you select [insert behavior(s)] as the least important activity or activities for a company to engage in?
- Are there sustainable business practices in addition to the ones I have laid out that are especially important to you? Why?
- I may also ask other questions that attempt to get at why a respondent sorted these behaviors as he did.
Task 3: Please use the groups of branded cards and your hierarchy of behavior cards to answer the following questions.

Questions about Task 3:

- Do you associate any of these brands with the corporate behaviors you identified as important?
- What do you know about the company that produces [insert brand]?
- Do you associate any of these brands with corporate behaviors that conflict with the ones you identified as important?
- What do you know about the company that produces [insert brand]?
- I may also ask other questions that attempt to understand why a particular brand/company is associated with being sustainable (or unsustainable) in the participant’s mind.
Appendix B
Concept map representing the relationships between final codes