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Green Marketing Communities and blogs: Mapping consumer’s attitudes for future sustainable marketing

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Green Marketing Communities and blogs: Mapping consumer’s attitudes for future sustainable marketing

Abstract

The last three decades have seen consumers’ environmental consciousness grow as the environment has moved to a mainstream issue. Results from our study of green marketing blog site comments in the first half of 2009 finds thirteen prominent concepts: carbon, consumers, global and energy were the largest themes, while crisis, power, people, water, fuel, product, work, time, water, organic, content and interest were the others. However sub issues were also identified, as the driving factor of this information is coming from consumer led social networks. While marketers hold some power, consumers are the real key factor to possess influence for change. They want to drive change and importantly, they have the power. Power to the people.

Introduction and Background

The last three decades have seen a progressive increase in consumers’ environmental consciousness as the environment has moved from a fringe, to a mainstream issue (Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999). Driving this has been a number of factors including increased media coverage, greater awareness of environmental problems, stringent legislation (both national and international) and the impact of major industrial disasters on public opinion (McIntosh, 1991; Butler, 1990; Tapon & Leighton, 1991; Wagner, 1997). Consequently, consumers have become more concerned about their everyday habits and the impact that these can have on the environment (Krause, 1993).

Marketers responded to this phenomenon by developing green products (Kalafatis et al., 1999). Unfortunately, emerging evidence suggests a curious paradox (Wong et al., 1996; Aspinall, 1993) and despite evidence that society is increasingly sympathetic towards the environment, many green products have not achieved the level of market success that would have been expected (Kalafatis et al., 1999). In many consumer product categories, green producers have achieved disappointingly low levels of market share (Kalafatis et al., 1999) and have since prompted research on green consumers (Mulcahy, 2004).

Previous research has attempted to identify the determinants and develop a profile of green consumers (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972; Kinnear et al., 1974). It is widely recognized that socio demographic variable are less valuable for predicting green purchase behavior (Shamdasani et al., 1993; Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Mainieri et al., 1997; Straughan & Roberts, 1999; Shaw & Clarke, 1999) since the results were reported to be inconsistent. Consequently, the focus of research has moved to psychological factors, such as consumer’s attitudes (Straughan & Roberts, 1999; Kim & Choi, 2005). While various factors which influence green purchase behavior have been examined, the significant factors and their exact relationships are still unclear (Chan & Yam, 1995; Chan & Lau, 2000; Kim & Choi, 2005). Based on this, this research aims to understand consumers’ purchase behavior toward green products. Our research attempts to answer the following question:

What is the relationship between consumers’ attitudes and rhetoric on green blog sites?
Significance of research and research gap

The results of this study will present research which will clarify the important determinants of green purchase behavior where relevant research has been sparse, despite the significance of environmental business. Furthermore, this study would not only present a significant contribution to green consumerism, but will provide useful insights for marketing practitioners who market green products, where they can incorporate the identified factors into their marketing, promotion and communication activity.

Previous studies focusing on green purchase behavior have mainly profiled green consumers (Anderson & Cunninghamman, 1972; Kinnear et al., 1974; D’Souza et al., 2007) and the process of green purchase decision making (Kim & Choi, 2005; Mainieri et al., 1997; Follows & Jobber, 2000). Although various factors which influence environmentally responsible purchase behavior have been examined, the significant factors and their exact relationships are still unclear (Chan & Yam, 1995; Chan & Lau, 2000; Kim & Choi, 2005). In addition, most of these studies have been conducted in European and the U.S. Thus, the research for green purchase behavior except for the above contexts has been sparse although cultural and social contexts make an impact on perceptions of social responsibility, and therefore, on ethical purchase behavior (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Carrigan et al., 2004). To bridge this gap, the present study investigates green purchase behavior in Australia where the green markets have been growing rapidly (ABS, 2007).

Literature review

Green purchase behavior refers to the consumption of products that are benevolent or beneficial to the environment, recyclable or conservable and sensitive or responsive to ecological concerns (Mostafa, 2007). As public environmental concern has increased over several decades, consumers who demand products for immediate benefits toward themselves and for the long term benefits toward the environment have emerged and increased (Follows & Jobber, 2000). The currently prevailed trend is called ‘green consumerism’ (Chitra, 2007). Since this new type of consumption differs from ordinary consumption in which hedonic and self-interested outcomes are dominant (Shaw et al, 2000), a number of studies have attempted to identify the determinants of green purchase behavior, decision making process, and profile green consumers. Some research has examined socio demographic variables to explain the green purchase behavior (Anderson & Cunninghamman, 1972; Kinnear et al., 1974; Roberts, 1996). Given that the results of factors affecting environmental purchase behavior using demographic variables were reported inconsistent, the focus of research has shifted on to psychological factors, such as consumer’s attitudes. Arguably, environmental attitudes have been the most investigated factor to predict green purchase behavior in the past research (Shamdasani et al., 1993; Roberts & Straughan, 1999; Laroche et al., 2001; Kim & Choi, 2005). Based on the idea that attitudes predict actual behavior, several studies found that environmental concerns positively correlate with green purchase behavior (Roberts, 1996; Roberts & Straughan, 1999; Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Kim & Choi, 2005; Mainieri et al., 1997) where people with strong environmental concern are likely to behave environmentally responsible compared to those with less environmental concern.

Micro-segments of consumers have been created such as ethical and green consumers and voluntary simplifiers have enhanced value for markets (Craig-Lees & Hill, 2002). Voluntary Simplicity is a system of beliefs of satisfaction, fulfillment and happiness arisen from the
practice of committing oneself to the nonmaterial aspects of life including self-reliance and intellect, and is reducing consumption (Elgin, 1981; Mazza, 1997; Zavestoski, 2002) and anticonsumption (Etzioni, 1998; Iwata, 1997).

Attitude theory considers how preferences are derived from beliefs and evaluations in combination with social norms and the individual’s motivation to comply with those norms. The postmodern consumer has the inclination to purchase via emotion (Leach, 2000). Marketers must recognize the impact of post-modernism on changing consumer green preferences and must communicate by understanding these new values. With the necessity to overthrow symbolism for monetary and lifestyle reasons, there must be an acceptance of avoidance of consumption of luxury items, and restraint shown from general consumption.

The positive link between attitude and green purchase behavior has been reported however, the strength of this positive linkage is controversial (Kim & Choi, 2005). For example, Schlegelmilch et al. (1996) examined environmental attitudes concerning environmental quality and knowledge, recycling behavior and politically motivated activities to uncover the relationships between these factors and pro-environmental purchasing behavior consisting of both general purchasing decision toward green products. Their study showed that the linkage between environmental attitudes and overall purchase behavior was the strongest among the researched linkages. Similarly, the recent research conducted by Kim and Choi (2005) reported the significant positive relationship between consumers’ environmental concern and green purchase behavior.

However, research conducted by Mainieri et al. (1997) reported contrary results where respondents did not display their concerns about environmental issues when purchasing products although generally they had a favorable perception toward the environment. Precisely, the proportion of their respondents who have bought any green products was only 14-30%. Such a weak relationship between attitudes and actual purchase behavior has been reported as attitude-behavior gap in a large number of studies in green consumerism (Winski, 1991; Kalafatis et al., 1999). Nevertheless, Ajzen and Fishbein (1991) argue that by incorporating other external variables such as personal and social norms the link between attitudes and behavior may be strengthened.

**Methodology: Content Analysis and Leximancer Analysis**

The results reported in this paper illustrate the use of automated content analysis software in the study of green blog sites. The researchers adopted a content analysis discussion technique because it is both a systematic and replicable technique that is widely used by social scientists to reduce extensively worded texts into fewer content categories (Krippendorff, 2004). Using content analysis in this research enabled the researchers to systematically engage a large volume of textual data with relative ease. The Leximancer results presented illustrates both conceptual analysis and relational analysis. The conceptual analysis documented the presence and frequency of concepts (i.e. words and phrases). Whereas the relational analysis measured and identified how the concepts related to each other in the documents analysed. A major strength of using Leximancer software in this research is that it deals with both forms of content analysis (Smith, 2005). This means that Leximancer systematically alternates between semantic and relational extraction from the co-occurrence of words within any textual corpus even though these functions are never independent of each other. In addition, Leximancer statistically analyses text knowing it contains both indirect (semantic) similarity
of context and a direct (relational) similarity, the latter being extracted from the episodic segments of (defaulting to) three sentences (Waddell and McKenna, 2005, p. 5).

**Leximancer Interpretation and Online Social Blogs analysis**

Online social networks are groups that have a common set of interests or goals resulting in a complex matrix of associative contacts (Mok, Morris, Benet-Martinez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007). Social network growth in Australia in 2008 saw Twitter grow by 343 percent, LinkedIn: 193 and Facebook: 116 (Source: Nielsen Customer Analysis, 2008). The social capital within these networks is arguably strong and within certain cliques that have the same core values, attitudes and beliefs – such as green communities, bad e-word of mouth could mean overnight failure of products.

The responses were gathered as data for analysis and forms an approximate 92,000 word corpus derived from green marketing websites found via Google after searching for ‘green marketing’, ‘sustainable marketing’ and ‘eco marketing’. Then sites were snowballed from there.

The following preliminary analysis presents grounded research. While the authors acknowledge that ‘fully’ grounded research is not possible, it is somewhat diminished by using the content analysis tool Leximancer (Smith & Humphreys, 2006), because its concept mapping improves grounded analysis by mathematically limiting the human element in interpretation. The initial Leximancer analysis revealed 30 concepts. However, some concepts were unrelated to the paper’s search for consumer commentary on green aspects, so were therefore deleted. For example, the words “green” and “marketing” concepts were deleted because they were used specifically by blog users interchangeably. Concepts that were also deleted were people, day, likely, take and site. After this stage of hand-seeding, a sequence of iteration of the corpus was formulated and mapped using Leximancer extraction (see Figure 1). The concept map displays thirteen themes (identified as circles): carbon, consumers, global and energy were the largest themes, while crisis, power, people, water, fuel, product, work, time, water, organic, content and interest were the others.

Given the limitations on paper length, the following analysis will focus on describing the concept map to interpret the different issues. Many of the 13 concepts (e.g., the most prominent, carbon, consumers, global and energy) emerge because they are central to blogger discussion and belief. However, they draw together the important focus of the study, which is the examination of green blog site comments. Reviewing the document summaries that informed each concept reveals that “carbon” looks at renewable energy, reducing emissions, climate change, reduce, environmental, impact and companies. “Energy” looks at conserving it, power stations needing to be more accountable and efficient, marketers, community involvement and looking at renewable energy. “Consumers” focuses on products, impact and companies need to provide information. “Global” discusses warming, climate, industry, carbon emissions, consumer and impact. These themes also have strong relationships with concepts power, organic, marketing and people. When comments were read, the relationships between the major concepts with people and power proved to be interesting, as using online social network green marketing sites to create change were prominent. “Marketers” related strongly to consumers, purchase and products, the environment, climate links, information and power. The “people” concept showed strong revelations of saving, given the proper information on being clean and issues of time and work showed to be important.
It is interesting that government was not found to be a key concept. The driving factor of this information is that it is a consumer led social networks. While marketers hold some power, consumers are the real key factor found from this analysis. They want to drive change, and they want change. Power to the people is a key finding from this data. This brief Leximancer description, combined with the visual concept map, have illustrated how content analysis can be used to explain environmental bloggers.

**Figure 1: Leximancer concept analysis**

![Leximancer Concept Map](image)

**Conclusion**

The research provided an analysis of green marketing blog comments and posts. Using this study as a starting point, more research is planned to develop a framework of attitudes commented on within online green blog sites. Marketers need to be monitoring rhetoric to gauge consumer sentiment and attitudes towards corporations’ research and marketing activity and product releases, as consumer driven eWOM can be more powerful. The concepts that are important to blog users in the first half of 2009 are carbon, energy, consumers and global issues, however there are sub issues as well. This study would not only present a significant contribution to green consumerism, but would provide useful insights for marketing practitioners, policy makers and Government.

Research findings that 23 percent of Australian adults (Hamilton & Mail, 2003) and 19 percent of adults in the USA (Schor, 1998) had downshifted by reducing consumption levels, a significant and potentially profitable market segment. As Etzioni (1998) concluded, it is materialism not consumption that is being rejected. Best practice is sought after and expectations that businesses represent their products truthfully, as found in our study.
References


