

A Study of Consumers' Perception in Relation to Green Products in North Macedonia

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Abstract – There is no question that consumers are changing the way they buy. A variety of societal factors are driving consumers to increasingly seek out unique and differentiated products that fit their lifestyle. One of acclaimed social factors would be growing recognition and attention toward environmentally friendly products, so is called “green products”.

Because of the environmental hazards concerning to poor biodegradability that non-green products cause, the interest and awareness of green products has constantly been on the increase. By understanding the way consumers perceive external information and their values-driven behavior, we would be in a good position to formulate sound marketing strategy. We believe that consumer behavior can best be understood through a segmentation model with regard to knowing what they buy, how they buy, and why they buy, requiring going beyond demographics and studying how they live.

Our objective, therefore, is to collect suitable information about perception in relation to lifestyle toward green products to have a better understanding of consumer behaviour, throughout utilizing the field research methodology by formulating focus groups.

Keywords – Green products, consumer behaviour, consumer perception, lifestyle.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays environmental topics are one of the most discussed topics all around the world. In his research Schlossberg (1990) has shown that 84% of consumers expressed concern on issues related to the environment and some consumers are changing their consumptive and purchasing behaviors because of their concern, in the same topic we found the importance of environmental issues to Fisher, (1990) research. According to Hallin (1995) and McCarty and Shrum (2001), people engage in environmental behavior as a result of their desire to solve environmental problem, to become role models and a belief that they can help to preserve the environment.

There is no question that consumers are changing the way they buy. A variety of societal factors are driving consumers to increasingly seek out unique and differentiated products that fit their lifestyle. One of acclaimed social factors would be growing recognition and attention toward environmentally friendly products, so is called “green products”.

Buying behaviour is triggered by consumers recognizing discrepancy between their ideal state and actual state, leading to a series of actions such as information search and alternative evaluation. And their ideal state is formulated according to configuration of perceived information and their internal value associated with their experience and cultural background. In other words, perceived information and

internal value configured their ideal state that leads to buying behavior.

By understanding the way consumers perceive external information and their values-driven behavior, we would be in a good position to formulate sound marketing strategy. We believe that consumer behavior can best be understood through a segmentation model with regard to knowing what they buy, how they buy, and why they buy, requiring going beyond demographics and studying how they live.

As discussed in the above, there is thought-provoking fact in consumer behavior in relation to green products; there are consumers, who actually buy green products together with their own belief or value, but there are consumers whose belief or value doesn't lead to actual buying behavior. So our question should be represented this way;

"What micro or psychological factor leads consumers to take actual buying behavior in relation to green products?"

According to Dietz et al., (1998) green purchasing is the behavioural factors which include environmental-friendly behaviour of the consumers. Authors that we have mentioned before has stated that green purchasing can be defined as buying the environmental-friendly products or so-called green products. On the other hand, green purchasing can be defined as the purchase or buying of products that can reduce the environmental impact. There are other authors that give different opinion about this issue, and declare that green product is identical with the term "eco-friendly product" (Kawitkar, 2013), "environmental-friendly product" and "ecological product" (Chen & Chai, 2010). Authors, Chen and Chai (2010), emphasise that green product is the product which has minimum impact on environment and it incorporates the strategies with recycled materials, reduced packaging and using less harmful substances.

Authors, Lasuin and Kawitkar (2013) well-defined green product as "the products which are friendly to the environment or ecology". The authors additional explained that green product is the product that would not bring any harmful effect to a healthy person. For example, Malaysia has launched its own eco-labelling schemes under Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM). Any organizations in Malaysia can apply when they have intention to claim and certify their product as green product under SIRIM Eco-labelling Scheme which also known as National

Eco-labelling Programme of Malaysia. According to SIRIM (2011), product categories under this scheme include cleaning agents, construction or building, home appliance, home care products, lights, office supplies (not paper-specific), package container (not paper-specific), paper products or inks, personal care products, food and plants, adhesives and other product categories. According to Nimse et al. (2007) there are ten technical characteristics of green products, such us:

- 1) Made from natural and/or renewable resources
- 2) Bio-degradable
- 3) Locally obtained
- 4) Easily reused
- 5) No Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), Hydro chlorofluorocarbons (HCFCa) or other ozone depleting substances
- 6) Readily recycled
- 7) No environment degrading toxic chemicals or by-products in its life cycle
- 8) Incorporates recycled content
- 9) Promotes good indoor air quality
- 10) Durable, low maintenance

II. OBJECTIVE

Our objective, therefore, is to collect suitable information about perception in relation to lifestyle toward green products to have a better understanding of consumer behavior, throughout utilizing the field research methodology by formulating focus groups. By doing so, we believe that we would be able to enhance consumer confidence with regard to macro or psychological factors in consumer behavior; what cause consumers take certain actions including actual buying behavior and non-buying behavior, which is imperative to elaborate a sound marketing strategy.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As it has been mentioned, our theoretical areas of research are **perception, attitude and the self**.

Perception¹: Perceptual process

Perceptual process is composed of three stages; exposure (sensation), attention, and interpretation Solomon et.al (2016). Only a very small number of the stimuli in a consumer's environment are ever noticed (exposure) of these stimuli noticed, even smaller numbers are attended to (attention) and the meaning of a stimulus is interpreted by

Askegaard, Margaret K. Hogg, pp.36

¹ "Consumer Behaviour – A European Perspective, third edition", Michael Solomon, Gary Bamossy, Soren

the individual, who is influenced by his or her unique biases, needs and experiences (interpretation). Critical aspect of this process is that every stage is highly subjective and the stimuli that do enter their consciousness are not processed objectively. Because of this subjective nature of perception, we need to know not only about general product information that evoke sensation and attention, but also about a consumer's mind such as self-concept in relation to interpretation.

Schema is organized collections of beliefs and feelings that facilitate interpretations in a consumer's mind. A consumer uses his or her own schema to interpret a product with a small portion of the raw data available and process it to be consistent with his or her own belief or self-concept.

We have made one assumption at selecting stage of theoretical areas of research in relation to consumer behavior and green products (foods, liquids for cleaning, detergents, drinks, toothpastes, face creams etc..) which product comprises basically two elements in themselves; functional performance (including price) and intangible/ augmented value perceived. And consumers buy product, depending on how much importance they put on each dimension in their purchase making process. Simply put, the thing is that we'd be in a good position to obtain a profound insight into consumer behavior with regard to green products by analyzing those two relative dimensions. And they could be explained to certain extent by using theories from perception to analyze functional performance and from attitude and the self to analyze intangible/ augmented value perceived. In this sense, theories from each area are used to guide our research, and they are going to be foundation for the previously cited questionnaire. And theories to be used are introduced in turn below.

Perception: Perceptual process

Attitude²: The functional theory of attitude

This theory was initially introduced to explain how attitudes facilitate social behavior. According to this

pragmatic approach, attitudes exist because they serve a function for the person. There are basic four types of functions based to Solomon et.al (2016);

1. utilitarian
2. value-expressive
3. ego-defensive
4. acknowledge function

The utilitarian function is related to the basic principles of reward and punishment, meaning that a consumer with this functional attitude seek for a product on the basis of whether the product provide a benefit from possession or utilization. The value-expressive function expresses the consumer's central values or self-concept. The ego-defensive function is performed by a consumer who wants to protect him-self or her-self from either external threats or internal feelings. And knowledge function works as the result of a need for order, structure or meaning.

The self³: Self-image congruence models

The self-concept refers to the beliefs a person holds about his or her attributes, and how he or she evaluates these qualities.

The self-image congruence models predict that products will be chosen when their attributes match some aspect of the self. And these models assume a process of cognitive matching between these attribute and the consumer's self-image. According to Solomon (2004) there are basic three types of the self;

1. actual self
2. social self
3. ideal self

The actual self is actual state of cognitive image of a person. The social self is self-image that the person thinks it should be from social perspective. And the ideal self is configured self-image that the person seeks for, combining several societal factors.

² "Consumer Behaviour – A European Perspective, third edition", Michael Solomon, Gary Bamossy, Soren Askegaard, Margaret K. Hogg, pp.139

³ "Consumer Behaviour – A European Perspective, third edition", Michael Solomon, Gary Bamossy, Soren Askegaard, Margaret K. Hogg, pp.213

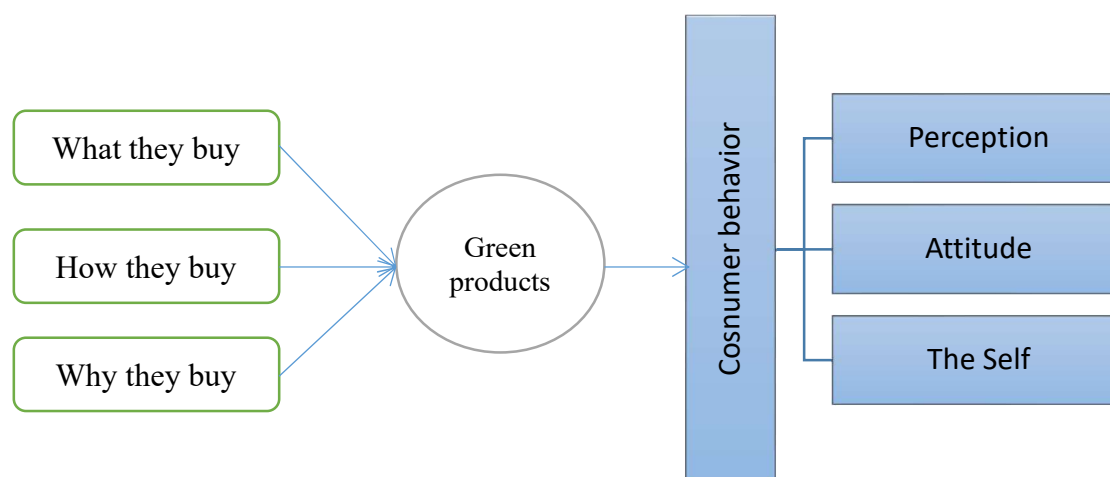


Figure no.1 Theoretical model of research (source; authors)

We assume that it is quite difficult for readers to make a clear distinction among perception, attitude and the self since they are basically interrelated and so there are so many overlapping elements. For those who couldn't digest our intention in relation to usage of the combination of those three theoretical areas of research, our aim, again, is that our main target area is perception so that we first follow the perceptual process (exposure – attention - interpretation). And there are imperative elements related with a consumer's belief or self-concept for a discussion of interpretation so that we take a close look at attitude (the functional theory of attitude) to know about the consumer's consumption features. And also we examine the self to know about relationship between a consumer's self-concept and social setting.

In this sense, we're going to apply these frameworks to empirical findings from focus group, drawing interrelationship between cause and effect. And this time, we seek differentiating factors that lead to actual buying of green products and non-buying of green products. So most of our analysis is going to be scrutinizing those findings and figuring out mechanism of perception, attitude and the self toward green products in relation to buying behavior.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The method we're going to use to analyze consumers is the "Focus Group" method, and the detail about the method is discussed below including general definition,

characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of focus group.

Focus Group⁴

A focus group isn't just getting a bunch of people together to talk. A focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2014). The purpose of a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product, or service. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic discussed in the focus group.

Characteristics of Focus Groups

Focus group interviews typically have five characteristics or features. These characteristics relate to the ingredients of a focus group (Krueger, et.al. 2000):

- ✓ Focus group involve people
- ✓ The people possess certain characteristics
- ✓ Focus group provide qualitative data
- ✓ Focus group have a focused discussion
- ✓ Help to understand the topic of interest.

According to Yin (2017) focus group is typically composed of five to ten people, but the size can range from

⁴ "A Practical Guide for Applied Research", Kruder and Casey: www.shef.ac.uk

as few four many as twelve. The group must be small enough for everyone to have an opportunity to share insights and yet large enough to provide diversity of perception.

Focus group is composed of participants who are similar to each other in a way that is important to the researcher. The nature of the homogeneity is determined by the purpose of the study. This similarity is a basis for requirement, and participants are typically informed of these common factors at the beginning of the discussion.

Focus group has traditionally been composed of people who do not know each other. For years it was considered ideal in participants were complete stranger.

The goal of focus group is to collect data that are of interest to the researcher –typically to find the range of opinion of people across several groups (Barbour, 2018). The researcher compares and contrasts data collected from at least three focus group. This gives from other group interactions in

which the goal is to come to some conclusion at the end of a discussion –reach consensus, provide recommendations, or make decisions among alternatives.

The question in a focus group is carefully predetermined. The questions are phrased and sequenced so they are easy to understand and logical to the participants. Most of them are open-ended questions. These questions appear spontaneous, but are developed through considerable reflections and inputs.

V. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Of total 11 respondents, we found the following findings:

Most of respondents answered the brand of their products is green product because it's cheap and of high quality relative to competitors'. (Participants haven't tried other products for trial purpose; they just believe the quality is high by comparing prices and package.)

Table no.1 Empirical findings; source (authors)

No	Features	Descriptions
1.	Brands: green brands	They believe that green products prevail relatively high performance even though price is low.
2.	Price	The price range is from cheap to medium.
3.	Content	They don't know much about the content, but they believe it's of high quality.
4.	Package	Simple design and looks quite nice and fresh.(fresh impression)
5.	Smell	Neutral. It doesn't smell so much. Smell comes with using softener.
6.	Texture	It feels soft enough.

Table nr.2 Empirical Findings; source (authors)

Nr.	Descriptions
1	- All of the respondents answered that they have

	thought of impact of green products substances on environment, but they said that they forget about it easily. Many of them have seen the "green logo" and
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	just think "that's good."
2	- All of the respondents have heard of green products via media such as commercial and TV, they are aware of the green logo on more or less all packages of green products.
3	- All of the respondents said that they don't feel they are using "green products", but mere products.
4	- They think that there is little impact to environment by using green products. And some of them added that they feel that they make the mother earth feel better.
5	- For Q14, some of them who answered yes said everything affects everything. And if the nature feels good, then the humans are healthier.
6	- All of the respondents feel in a way that they feel they did something good for environment after they purchase green products and notice the package says that it is environmentally friendly.
7	- Lifestyle in that they use green green products as a part of their life didn't fit into all of their lifestyle. One respondent answered, "it should be for everyone who cares about the already, troubled environment". And another respondent answered, "a bit yes, but it's not something I reflect much about".

⁵ A consumer's subjective judgment that asserts a price reflect quality of the product; e.g.,) high quality should

VI. ANALYSIS

One obvious and critical fact from the empirical findings is that consumers of the target group don't pay much attention to environmentally friendly products.

They seek for high functionality from green products in relation to price (mostly cheap/ medium). In other words, prices work as the surrogate indicator⁵ for them in relation to functional performance that the purchase green product prevails. And from the fact that most of the respondents answered they believe the green products purchased is of high quality, the functional performance of the product is just perceived value, which is highly subjective. They tend to settle for rather high quality with cheap/ medium prices, and they feel they did reasonable or wise purchase. This would probably come from their poor or decent purchasing power since they are students or group of consumers that have low level of income.

Basically they are not knowledgeable about green products per se. This fact would probably come from less attention to "green" subject, which could be reinforce by the remark made by all of the respondents that "they don't feel they are using 'green product', but mere product." This leads to buying behavior that emphasis importance in impression from package such as combination of colors and design, rather than first looking at contents or whether it is environmentally friendly or not. Most of the respondents choose a green product that gives them feeling of utility.

They have general knowledge about relationship between green products and environment and certain extent of effect on environmentally friendly products in relation to the goodness of usage. But those combined factors don't fit into their self-concept.

VII. CONCLUSION

In terms of perceptual process that is composed of three stages; exposure (sensation), attention, and interpretation, information obtained from package (sights) goes into sensory receptors of consumers in relation to target group whose demographic features are students and respondent age range from 22 till 55 from different cities in North Macedonia. Prices work as surrogate indicator to subjectively assess functional performance of the green products they buy. In other words, cheap or medium prices of green products sold in North Macedonia are interpreted as relatively high quality relative to competitors.

come with high prices. Cheap products don't prevail quality function/ quality.

In terms of attitude (the functional theory of attitude), we can conclude that consumers from the target group are basically utilitarian with regard to green products. They tend to seek for functional performance from reasonable prices. At the same time, they are potential to be value-expressive, which is not at conspicuous level enough to express themselves throughout buying a specific product with cognitive central value or self-concept.

In terms of the self (self-image congruence models), they regard green products as functional products rather than highly expressive social products since they prefer a functional, reliable green product. In other words, matching process between attributes of the product and some aspect of the self in relation to their actual buying behavior takes place with their actual self that seeks for realistic functionality for their life. They have blur image toward social and ideal self, but those are not at conscious level and are not reflected to their actual buying behavior as a result.

VIII. FINAL DISCUSSION

Our objective has been to answer to the question "*What micro or psychological factor leads consumers to take actual buying behavior in relation to green products?*" to elaborate a sound marketing strategy. So our goal is not just collecting information from focus group to know consumer behavior with referring to theoretical frameworks, but applying those cues to actual seller-buyer environment for marketing purpose.

Consumers are not motivated to process a lot of complex brand-related information. Instead they will be swayed by principles of behavioral learning, such as the simple responses caused by conditioned brand names, point-of-purchase displays. Involvement paradox⁶ takes place in a context where the less important the product is to consumers, the more important are many of the marketing stimuli such as packages and jingles that must be devised to sell it. Taking into consideration that the target group is stimuli-driven and utilitarian-oriented, not only making distinctive package design that evoke participative perceptual processing, but also reliable functional performance of the content have to be achieved with rather lower expenses. So close cooperation with production department is needed to further drive expenses down, and therefore, they can provide consumers with low prices together with high functionality, leading to positive poisoning of the product relative to competitors'.

⁶ "Consumer Behaviour – A European Perspective, third edition", Michael Solomon, Gary Bamossy, Soren

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