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Topić, M, Kostopoulos, I and Krstić, M

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Sustainability, Socio-demographic Differences, and Consumer Behavior

Editorial

Dr Martina Topić, The University of Alabama, College of Communication and Information Sciences, Department of Advertising and PR, Tuscaloosa, AL, United States

Dr Ioannis Kostopoulos, Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moore University, UK

Dr Miloš Krstić, Faculty of Sciences and Mathematics, University of Niš, Serbia

Modern society is driven by consumerism, and people increasingly use their leisure time and consumption to define who they are. During leisure time, purchasing becomes the primary means of communicating values, attitudes, status, and way of life. In a consumerist culture, an individual needs a steady and growing income to keep up with mass supply and consumption. Life is transforming the cycle of earning and spending like never before, with earnings continually being reinvested into consumption. The many negative effects of employment, long hours, and the need for higher salaries, on the one hand, and consuming as an endless cycle of goods and things, on the other, produce two complementary sides of the consumerist society. (Mont, 2004, Sheth et al., 2011). The increase in consumption has led to a host of environmental issues that have an impact on the community's ability to develop sustainably. Other, crucial environmental problems include climate change, air, water, and land pollution, irrational use of energy, exhaustion of natural resources, etc. The movement that brings back hope in the preservation of basic social and natural values is the movement of sustainable development, and, within it, also green marketing (Otto & Kaiser, 2014).

From the above discussion, it becomes apparent that environmental affairs are a hot topic on the news and public agenda, with an increased public and media debate on sustainable behavior. In addition to that, a plethora of research on purchase behavior indicates that people nominally support environmental concerns but do not always follow this up by buying from companies claiming to have green policies (Kanchanapibul, 2014). The latter often comes from cynical attitudes where many people believe that all green business is, in fact, greenwashing, and this is connected to media coverage where studies are showing that media express hostility towards businesses but, at the same time, some authors argued that media stimulate environmental destruction by concurrently advocating for economic growth and the continuation of capitalism whilst nominally calling for action on global warming and climate change (Grayson, 2009,

Topić, 2021). Some studies on shopping behavior have shown that, for example, consumers sometimes resent sustainable options because of the lack of power to decide what to buy. In a UK study on women's purchasing behavior on reduced-price shopping (the so-called yellow sticker shopping), Topić, Diers Lawson and Kelsey (2021) argued that many women resent reduced shopping because they must buy this food due to a lack of finances to buy regular products, and they, generally, do not prefer sustainable shopping because of the lack of agency (in consumption). These women mainly come from lower socio-demographics, which opens the question what is the link between socio-demographic background and sustainable purchase behavior?

Researchers in a variety of social disciplines, including psychology and behavioral economics, maintain that there are many instances of illogical behavior in the actual world, which are largely caused by various psychological disorders and abnormalities. In this regard, the most mentioned are cognitive biases related to inconsistencies in terms of discounting, contextual dependence (framing effect), lack of self-control, excessive optimism, and the like (Krstić & Pavlović, 2020, Chater & Oaksford, 2012, DeAngelo & McCannon, 2021). For example, studies on the behavior of organic food consumers have shown that consumers often find organic products or products with sustainable packaging too expensive, thus expressing views that they would shop sustainably if they could afford it (Mitchell & Topić, 2019), which opens a question of whether sustainability is possible within capitalism? The latter question has been a subject of academic debate for decades with many academics, sociologists, in particular, analyzing consumerism and its impact on the environment (Calder, 1990, Coghlan, 2009, Corrigan, 1997, Ewen & Ewen, 1992, Trentmann, 2016, Wright & Nyberg, 2015). Critical scholars also argued that the anthropocentric human civilization is based on liberal values and a thesis that humans have the right to excessively exploit the riches of nature and to use natural ecosystems irrationally. Most human production processes are driven by matter and energy taken from nature, but the remnants of final products are not returned "properly", but accumulate on a global scale as usable, but rarely used waste (Starck, 2003).

Green marketing is one of the key ideas to come out of the research on consumer behaviour and marketing, and it may be understood in three different ways: a) as the advertising of products that are considered 100% safe for the environment (definition from the point of view of retail), b) as the development and advertising of products designed to minimize negative effects on the

physical environment or on improve it quality (definition from the point of view of social marketing) and, c) as the efforts of organizations to produce, promote and sell products in a way that respects environmental issues (definition from the point of view of life weapons) (Polonsky, 2008). The biggest challenge of green marketing is how to harmonize the current needs of consumers with the principles of sustainable development and green consumption (Finney, 2014). To encourage more sustainable purchasing behavior of individuals, it is necessary to apply an approach to marketing that is focused on the individuals changing their habits and directing them in the direction of protecting natural resources.

In general, we can identify three behavioral components that influence attitudes and economic behavior, namely: affective, cognitive, and conative components. Thereby, some authors, like Christopher Bratt (1999) and Sanjay Jain, and Gurmeet Kaur (2004) have studied the individual influence of each of those components, while others (Stone, 1995, Fraj & Martinez, 2007) consider that their mutual influence is too strong and therefore developed measuring instruments that use all three behavioral components simultaneously. The cognitive component consists of what an individual thinks about someone or something (whether right or wrong). The emotional component refers to his feelings towards someone or something, while the third component (intentional) represents the individual's intention to act in a certain way (Krstić & Pavlović, 2020). Some studies, such as Joel Davis (1993) and Matthias Finger (1994) show only a limited influence of cognitive factors, such as knowledge about the environment, but a significant influence of affective factors on making environmentally conditioned purchase decisions.

There is an alternative way to examine the driving force behind adopting an ecologically conscious behavior pattern. This strategy is predicated on an individual's cost-benefit analysis, which is integrated into the decision-making process. (Krstić, 2014, Krstić & Krstić, 2016, Krstić, 2022). Given that the choice of a certain behavior can bring costs as well as benefits, a consumer will behave in an ecologically acceptable way if it is likely that it will bring enough benefits to compensate the cost of paying a higher price for green products or the comfort associated with recycling waste or saving energy. Therefore, one of the important future directions of research should be the determination of individual perceived benefits resulting from ecologically oriented behavior. It can be added to this that consumers can really feel individual benefits as a consequence of environmentally conscious behavior, but these consequences do not have to be related to a noticeable improvement in the quality of the environment, but e.g. with

emotional benefits, based on psychological factors. In certain cases, direct personal benefits can also be achieved, such as the health benefits of organically grown food, money savings resulting from energy savings, etc.

In the special issue, researchers provide insights from consumer research, e-commerce, and social psychology. To do so, we have curated a collection of papers that use a great variety of research strategies. Our collection includes a systematic literature review, and quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies from across the world, including Poland; the US; Romania, and Greece. This collection of papers includes therefore a series of studies on consumers' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards sustainable consumption.

Two of these papers have studied Generation Z consumers and their relationship with sustainable consumption. At first, Anca Anton in her paper, explores in detail the concept of the "other customer within the consumer-brand identification paradigm. Following a mixed methods approach and synthesizing arguments from social identity theory, social comparison theory, and other customer perception (OCP), the authors investigate how Gen Z consumers construct the image of other consumers (focusing on demographic profile, physical appearance, personality, and lifestyle. The findings of their study highlight the relevance of understanding national specificity and intergenerational dynamics about other customer perception, the categorization, identification, and comparison related to the other customer as a self-evaluation process carried out by the focal customer, and the need for a critical approach to the relationship between sustainability and Gen Z as customers, as the connection perceivable at international level might not be relevant at national levels.

At the same time, Ioannis Rizomyliotis, Kleopatra Konstantoulaki, and Apostolos Giovanis provide valuable insights into the influence of social media influencers on Generation Z's purchasing decisions, particularly in the cosmetics industry. Their study, involving an online survey of 201 Gen-Z consumers, examines the impact of influencer credibility on brand consideration and purchase intention. Additionally, they explore how green consumption values modulate these relationships. The findings reveal that while influencer credibility significantly boosts brand consideration and purchase intention, these effects are moderated by green consumption values. The study underscores that Generation Z's environmental and ethical concerns play a crucial role in shaping their response to influencer marketing. This research

contributes to the understanding of digital marketing strategies and consumer behavior in the era of social media and environmental awareness.

In addition to these two papers, this special issue contains evidence on sustainable eating and drinking. Firstly, Michal Chmiel conducted a quantitative study on 292 adult Polish beer consumers (113 women and 179 men) on the quality of consumer decisions consumers make under pressure. Specifically, he explored the relationship between training received during formal education and the mental mindset of the need to avoid cognitive closure which leads to more efficient information search characteristics. Despite the time pressure, consumers collect more unique information, postpone the freezing phase, and arrive at better decisions. His hypotheses were mostly confirmed which gives partial evidence to the idea that formal education teaches open-mindedness and increases the adaptation of consumers to the environment rich in the need to engage in complex decisions. The author recommends that consumers should invest in education that teaches how to make better decisions that comes from success stories of sustainable products.

Moreover, Po-Lin Pan, Manu Bhandari, and Juan Meng conducted a very interesting quantitative study on healthy eating and its antecedents and implications for consumers. Specifically, they carried out a survey on 801 American consumers with the use of a structured questionnaire to examine the influence body mass index (BMI), obesity knowledge, self-efficacy, and online nutrition information seeking (ONIS) have on healthy food purchase (HFP). Their findings suggest that the impact of ONIS on HFP is significantly generated by obesity knowledge but not by BMI. Furthermore, ONIS and self-efficacy yielded individual and interactive effects on HFP. Specifically, ONIS did not only generate a direct effect on HFP but also interacted with self-efficacy for HFP. Based on these findings, the authors propose that online health information should be strategically crafted to promote healthy eating behavior, as consumers with various health conditions were activated to purchase healthier foods through ONIS. They also suggest that ONIS can assist in mediating the impact of obesity knowledge on HFP.

The special issue includes a very important paper from Sarah Marschlich and Ganga Dhaneshb, who conducted a study aiming to develop a measurement instrument to identify socially responsible consumers by their personality traits and behavioral intentions along five dimensions of hypermodernity. Their research combined a systematic review of journal articles within

business ethics, consumer psychology, and communication studies to propose a measurement, which was subsequently tested and refined through a quantitative study on 292 consumers. The important contribution of the authors' paper lies in setting theoretically grounded psychographic variables that give robust insights into socially responsible consumers with high CSR expectations. Moreover, the paper offers practitioners a very useful toolkit to identify socially responsible consumers.

Finally, in his paper, Ioannis Rizomyliotis provides critical insights into the growing online market for sustainable products, which is expected to significantly impact the future of e-commerce. The paper focuses on consumer trust as a pivotal factor influencing online purchase intentions for sustainable products. Through a survey of 278 participants, the study examines the determinants of consumer trust in online transactions, particularly regarding perceived risk, security, and privacy. The findings demonstrate that these factors significantly predict trust in e-commerce platforms, which subsequently influences the intention to purchase sustainable products online. Additionally, consumer trust in sustainable products is shown to moderate this relationship. This research contributes to the understanding of consumer behavior in the digital marketplace, emphasizing the importance of trust in promoting the sale of sustainable products. It offers valuable insights for e-commerce businesses aiming to optimize their operations and align with environmentally conscious consumer preferences.

We believe that our special issue constitutes a very good initial collection of arguments, insights, and research findings on how contemporary consumers purchase, use and consume products and services sustainably. The issue shows the importance of studying consumers, their attitudes and values, and understanding their consumption behavior. In particular, it is important to distinguish between various generations and their behavior, which is conditioned by the social circumstances they lived in and that some papers in this issue show. The issue also developed new methods for sustainability and consumer behavior research and thus, future research should expand on these findings and arguments as well as provide future research directions.

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