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Sustainable Product Purchase Behavior

Danielle Meader

Grossman School of Business, University of Vermont

Honors College Thesis

Amy Tomas, PhD

May 12, 2022

Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Literature Review	7
Social Factors as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions	7
Sustainable Knowledge as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions	9
Product Quality as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions	11
Product Pricing as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions	13
College Student Shopping Behavior	14
Critique of Literature	15
Purpose	16
Methods	17
Results	18
Questions 1 and 2	18
Question 3	19
Question 4	19
Question 5	20
Question 6	21
Question 7	21
Question 8	22
Question 9	22
Question 10	23
Discussion	23

Limitations	25
Further Research Opportunities	26
Appendix A: The Theory of Planned Behavior	28
Appendix B: Research Information Sheet	29
Appendix C: Interview Guide	32
Works Cited	34

Abstract

Companies are facing significant issues convincing consumers to purchase sustainable products. Previous research shows that the key influences towards purchase behavior for environmentally-friendly products are social factors, sustainable knowledge, product quality, and product price. However, the research investigating this issue specifically for the young, college educated consumers (YCEC) demographic is limited and somewhat conflicting. The purpose of this study is to understand consumer purchase behavior for sustainable products in a population of YCEC pursuing an undergraduate degree in business administration. In this context, sustainable products are defined as products that provide environmental, social and economic benefits over their whole life cycle, from the extraction of raw materials until the final disposal. To investigate this issue, mini focus groups of 5-6 participants were asked open-ended questions about their sustainable product purchase behavior, including one warm up question and nine specific questions pertaining to the study. The results showed that the main barriers preventing more sustainable purchase decisions for YCEC are price, product quality, and lack of awareness, with price being strongly viewed as the most important factor. Additionally, it was found that YCEC often find it difficult to trust companies' marketing about sustainability, and think that sustainability knowledge and motivation do not necessarily lead to actual purchase behavior. These results should be taken into consideration when designing future studies or creating marketing campaigns for sustainable products targeted at college student consumers.

Introduction

Currently, the purchase rate of environmentally-friendly products is higher in young, college-educated consumers than older demographics, however it is still low. A recent study showed that only 33% of Millennials will choose a sustainable alternative when available (Simon-Kucher, 2021). Although this is higher than the older generations, where only 24-29% were shown to choose a sustainable alternative, it is still a concerningly low statistic given the declining health of the planet (Simon-Kucher 2021). Marketing communications for these sustainable products do not appear to be influential enough to convince YCEC to prioritize sustainability over other factors in their purchasing decisions. Some of the factors that influence sustainable product purchase decisions in YCEC are social factors, sustainability knowledge, product quality, product pricing, and general college student shopping behavior. Increasing green purchase behavior is extremely important towards maintaining the health and sustainability of the planet. Current consumerism habits have a significant negative impact on the planet, because they require extraction and exploitation of natural resources, accumulation of waste, and concentration of pollutants (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007). Influencing YCEC to have a more positive attitude towards sustainable products could be a vital step because their purchasing behaviors will have an impact on the market for at least the next fifty years. The core issue lies in discovering the barriers preventing YCEC from choosing to purchase environmentally-friendly products. The results of this study may serve as justification for future research on how to influence YCEC to prioritize product sustainability in their purchasing decisions.

The issue of understanding YCEC' motivations and barriers for purchasing environmentally-friendly products is crucial towards the future of society and the world at large. Earth is currently in a state of crisis with climate change, which can already be seen through catastrophic events such as the melting of large ice masses, dangerous rise of the sea level, and intense spread of wildfires. Although there are many contributors towards climate change, one of them is certainly the overconsumption of goods that pollute the earth in their creation, use, and eventual disposal. It is therefore vital that consumers adopt a more positive attitude towards green purchase behavior. In order to assist in the efficiency of this development, studies like this must occur to help understand why consumers are more or less likely to make green purchasing decisions. Many YCEC already have a relatively positive attitude towards helping the environment and making sustainable purchases. However, several studies have shown that a positive attitude towards sustainability does not always cause actual action. The likely reason is that, although sustainability is a significant driving force in YCEC' purchase behavior, other factors such as price and product quality are more significant forces. By understanding why YCEC are not choosing to purchase green products, firms may be able to more effectively influence YCEC to put a high priority on sustainability while shopping. This is an important demographic to study because it is growing significantly over time, at a projected rate of about 4.2% per year (Study Projects Dramatic Growth, 2018). Currently, there about 220 million college students in the world (Tertiary Education, 2021). By 2030, it is predicted that there will be about 380 million, and by 2040 it is predicted that there will be about 594 million (Study Projects Dramatic Growth, 2018). Therefore, effective marketing of sustainable products to YCEC could have a significant positive effect on the long-term health of the earth.

Motivation for the present study comes from placing a priority on helping the environment. It has been observed that many students who claim that they care deeply about the environment still tend to rarely purchase green products over their less sustainable counterparts. Studying the reasoning behind this purchase behavior was very interesting and important question to be asking. This research is significant because it could potentially make discoveries that would help the University of Vermont take a step in the right direction towards understanding students' green purchase motivations and actions.

Literature Review

Social Factors as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions

One of the key aspects of shopping behavior that influences sustainable purchase decisions is social factors. It is important to consider the emotional reasons that someone may choose to purchase a sustainable product or not. Some of the most significant social and emotional motivators in humans are shame and anticipated shame. A 2017 article written by Amatulli et al. considers this issue by studying the effectiveness of negative message framing versus positive message framing in promoting green purchases. It was found that negatively framed messages were much more effective in actually influencing consumers to purchase green products because they elicit anticipated shame (Amatulli et al., 2017). The feelings of shame and anticipated shame caused people to engage in sustainable behaviors so that they could reacquire a more positive view of themselves and their role in society (Amatulli et al., 2017). It is important to note, however, that this

effect was far less significant among consumers who demonstrated a low level of environmental concern when entering the study (Amatulli et al., 2017).

Similarly, a study by Nathalie Spielmann in 2020 investigated how green products' association with virtuous can influence consumers towards more sustainable purchase behavior due to social factors. In this study, virtuous products are defined as those that are, "perceived as beneficial for the future, even though users experience psychological, physical, and emotional costs during consumption" (Spielmann, 2020). It was found that consumers tend to consider green products as highly virtuous, and therefore purchasing them was found to increase their positive emotions and perception of themselves as virtuous consumers (Spielmann, 2020). Consumers gained intrinsic value from purchasing green products and believed themselves to be perceived as better people, therefore further increasing the sustainable product purchase intentions for the future. (Spielmann, 2020). This effect was found to be stronger in consumers who placed a higher significance on morality (Spielmann, 2020).

Both of these studies demonstrate that consumers can be motivated towards green purchase behavior due to emotional and social factors. This is further supported by a study by a 2020 study by Hosta and Zabkar, which found that social and personal norms, concern, and ethical ideologies all have strong impact on sustainable consumer behavior. People tend to avoid negative emotions and pursue positive emotions, which can influence their purchase behavior. By using negative message framing as well as virtuous cues in green product advertising, marketers can effectively target consumers'

desire to avoid shame and pursue virtue, therefore making them more likely to make sustainable consumption decisions (Amatulli et al., 2017 and Spielmann, 2020).

Considering how consumers view themselves both internally and in relation to society is an important issue to investigate, especially for YCEC. Studies show that emotional and social factors are a key influencer toward sustainable purchase decisions.

Sustainable Knowledge as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions

Another key influence of shopping behavior that impacts sustainable purchase decisions is knowledge of the sustainability of a product or company. In this paper, sustainable knowledge is defined as the information available to consumers about the sustainability aspects of the product or company in question. In 2020, researchers Hosta and Zabkar tested the magnitude of the impact of sustainable information availability by asking interviewees to respond to statements such as, “I usually know where to verify the information about the products’ environmental impact/social impact,” and, “I know the production process impact of environmental products/socially friendly products I usually buy” (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020). They found that availability of information had a significant positive influence on environmentally responsible consumer behavior. In turn, they found that lack of sustainability information is one of the most significant obstacles preventing people from practicing sustainable purchase behavior (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020). Interviewees noted that currently they believe that helpful sustainability information is available to an extent, but they were skeptical that companies are truly

giving all the important information, especially about the production process (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020).

An article by Longo et al. supported these conclusions by stating that providing people with information about the sustainability of their products is an important way to influence their consumption beliefs, attitudes, and intentions (Longo et al., 2017). However, they concluded that when consumers have significant sustainability knowledge and expertise about a product or company, not just basic information, their purchase behavior is actually negatively affected (Longo et al., 2017). Participants of the study who had a high amount of sustainability knowledge across a wide range of products and companies exhibited increased dilemma, tension, and even paralysis in their purchase decisions (Longo et al., 2017). These people were more aware of the complexities associated with any product or company being truly sustainable, and therefore often found themselves in a “self-inflicted sustainable consumption paradox,” where they felt like none of their consumption options were truly holistically sustainable (Longo et al., 2017). This led Longo et al. to the conclusion that an abundance of knowledge regarding sustainability causes consumers to reach further dilemma and therefore actually become less likely to make sustainable purchase decisions.

A third study considered the effects of sustainable knowledge on purchase behavior through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior. The Theory of Planned Behavior is a widely accepted psychology framework that states that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are the three main factors that shape an individual's

behavioral intentions. A detailed diagram depicting the Theory of Planned Behavior can be found in the Appendix A. The study by Albayrak et al. supported the Theory of Planned Behavior in relation to green purchase behavior by showing that the consumers with a high level of environmental concern and a low level of skepticism were most likely to exhibit green purchase behavior (Albayrak et al., 2015). Although knowledge of the sustainability of a product can lead to higher environmental concern, an over-abundance of knowledge can also lead to skepticism from consumers. Therefore, these articles all come together to articulate the paradox associated with sustainable knowledge. It can certainly be a positive influence towards environmentally-friendly purchase behavior, however it is important to note that it can also become an obstacle when too much information is given.

Product Quality as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions

A third factor shown to be a key influence on sustainable purchase decisions is product quality, or perceived product quality. Many researchers hypothesize that one of the main reasons that consumers choose not to shop more sustainably is because they find the environmentally-friendly alternatives to their typically purchased products to be of lower quality. A study conducted in 2017 by Mai et al. investigated this theory by studying consumers implicit and explicit associations with ethical products.

Mai et al. first explain the main reason that consumers implicitly associate sustainable products as less effective, even if they have positive attitudes towards sustainability.

Essentially, this is due to the zero-sum heuristic, which states that consumers assume when a company invests in one superior attribute, they will compensate with inferiority in other attributes (Mai et al., 2017). Therefore, because most consumers consider sustainability to be a superior attribute, they implicitly assume that sustainable products must have restrictions in other areas of their product attributes (Mai et al., 2017). This leads them to the logical assumption that environmentally-friendly products have a lower effectiveness or utilitarian value than their non-sustainable counterparts.

In the same study, Mai et al. found that consumers also rely heavily on explicit associations when determining whether sustainable products will be effective. These explicit factors may include product advertisements, word of mouth, and visual judgements. This is important to consider because although implicit beliefs are difficult to change, explicit factors are easily modified especially when consumers show greater interest in sustainability issues (Mai et al., 2017). Additionally, it was confirmed that participants with stronger associations that sustainable products have lower effectiveness were in fact more likely to forego actually purchasing these products (Mai et al., 2017).

A study by Luchs and Kumar investigated which tradeoffs consumers would be most tolerant of when purchasing more sustainable products. Participants were either presented with a tradeoff between product sustainability and hedonic value or product sustainability and utilitarian value. In this study, it was found that consumers are more likely to purchase a sustainable product when they have to trade off hedonic value than when they have to trade off utilitarian value (Luchs & Kumar, 2015). This conclusion

shows that consumers place a relatively high value of the utilitarian values, or quality, of a product. Therefore, it can be seen that the lack of product quality or perceived lack of product quality that is often associated with sustainable products is a significant factor influencing consumers' sustainable purchase decisions.

Product Pricing as a Key Influence on Sustainable Decisions

The final factor that was investigated as a potential key influence of sustainable purchase decisions is product pricing. Many sustainable products are sold at a higher price point than their less sustainable counterparts, therefore making them potentially less attractive to consumers. Witek and Kuźniar conducted a study in 2020 that supported this notion by confirming that consumers with better personal financial situations tend to be more likely to buy green products than those with worse financial situations (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020). Not only did these consumers have more means to purchase more expensive products, but they also were found to be more knowledgeable about the issues of sustainability than consumers with worse financial situations (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020). In addition, the study suggests that low-income consumers could be influenced to purchase sustainable products more by targeted marketing that highlights the effective performance of the product and includes an emotional message that appeals to physiological and safety needs (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020).

In a recent study by Ross and Milne, consumers were segmented into three groups based on their disposition toward self-other tradeoffs. The Benevolent group had a high

societal orientation and low self-orientation, the Equity Sensitive group had a balanced societal and self-orientation, the Entitled group had a low societal orientation and a high self-orientation (Ross & Milne, 2020). These groups were then evaluated based on their preference for price, quality, or sustainability as the most important product attribute. The study showed that for the Benevolent group, sustainability provided the highest utility of the three factors (Ross & Milne, 2020). For the Entitled group, on the other hand, price provided the highest utility (Ross & Milne, 2020). Overall, the Benevolent group was the most likely to purchase sustainable products, followed by the Equity Sensitive group and finally the Entitled group (Ross & Milne, 2020). Therefore, it can be concluded that the importance of product pricing for sustainable products varies dependent on consumers' self-other tradeoff preferences. Consumers would be most likely to purchase environmentally-friendly products that are priced high if they are in a good personal financial situation and have a high societal orientation and low self-orientation.

College Student Sustainable Shopping Behavior

It is important to consider not only the key influences on consumers' sustainable purchases in general, but also specifically for YCEC. While this demographic shares some similarities with the larger population, they also bring a unique perspective that can cause different preferences. A recent study by Joshi and Rahman investigated the predictors of green purchase behavior for young, college educated consumers. They found that the most influential factor for YCEC is social influence, followed by attitude

towards green purchasing, and perceived environmental knowledge (Joshi & Rahman, 2016). The three least influential factors in this study were recycling participation, ecolabeling, and exposure to environmental messages through media, although these three all did still have some effect on sustainable purchase behavior (Joshi & Rahman, 2016). This is important because it shows what areas marketers should consider appealing to in order to encourage YCEC to make more sustainable purchase decisions.

Building off of this, Witek and Kuźniar's study found that YCEC have a greater knowledge of environmental issues and are more critical of large corporations with poor habits than older generations (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020). However, the study also showed that educated consumers were more likely to place their own needs over the needs of the environment (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020). This provides some conflicting ideas, showing that YCEC are in a unique demographic where their age and education may be affecting their purchase behavior in opposing ways. Due to their age, they may have a higher motivation to purchase environmentally-friendly products, but due to their education, they may have a lower motivation to purchase environmentally-friendly products (Witek & Kuźniar, 2020). This shows that YCEC are a part of a dynamic demographic, and information is still conflicting about their sustainable shopping behavior.

Critique of Literature

Several points of strength and points of weakness were identified in the current literature. The number of recent studies on the topic of motivations for sustainable purchase

behavior was significant. The studies depicted varying viewpoints and remained reasonably unbiased. The authors presented the previous research that influenced them well and expanded upon it in a meaningful way. On the other hand, there is a significant gap of research in this field that is segmented based on various demographics. People of different ages, genders, nationalities, education levels, financial situations, etc. most likely have different motivations for their sustainable purchase decisions, but unfortunately most of the articles did not investigate each of these segments individually. In relation to this, there is still a lack of information in relation to YCEC specifically and their attitude towards purchasing environmentally-friendly products. For next steps, more studies should be conducted that investigate each demographical segment for their purchase motivations. Additionally, it would be helpful to have more research about what marketing tactics for sustainable products are most effective, to build off of the conclusions made about key motivating factors. The present study will be helpful in filling these gaps by investigating the unique sustainable purchase behaviors of undergraduate business students.

Purpose

The literature presented showed four main influences towards consumers' sustainable purchase decisions: social factors; sustainability knowledge; product pricing; and product quality. Each of these factors were found to play a significant role in green purchase attitude and behavior. The literature also investigated sustainable purchase behavior for YCEC specifically. Conflicting results about whether YCEC are more or less likely to purchase sustainable products than other

demographics were found in prior studies. This leaves an area for improvement in the sustainable purchase behavior research the present study will attempt to address.

The purpose of this study is to understand consumer purchase behavior for environmentally-friendly products in a population of YCEC. The core issue to be investigated is the motivations for sustainable product purchase behavior students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. Additionally, this study will attempt to make an inference about how to apply this knowledge towards more effective marketing for sustainable products in the future.

Methods

The participants for this study were YCEC who are pursuing an undergraduate business degree. These students were selected from student organizations in the business school, or invited to participate from professional development business classes. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were asked to give informed consent using the Research Information Sheet in Appendix B. As an incentive, students who participated were offered points towards their professional engagement badges.

This study used mini focus groups of 5-6 participants. Focus groups are an effective way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product, or service, and mini focus groups are beneficial because they are more comfortable for participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this study, there was one pilot focus group to refine the questions and procedure used, and two main focus groups afterwards. Participants were asked open-ended

questions about their sustainable product purchase behavior, including one warm up question and nine additional specific questions pertaining to the study. (See Appendix C for the detailed Interview Guide.) The procedure took approximately one hour, and was located in a reserved room within the business school. The focus groups were led by a moderator and observed by a note taker. Responses were audio recorded, and notes and recordings of the groups were subsequently analyzed to identify main themes and important issues.

Results

After conducting the focus groups, the responses were analyzed using the audio recordings and the notes taken. The following section provides an overview of the most important points discussed for each question. The list of questions can be found in the Interview Guide in Appendix B.

Questions 1 and 2:

“I think of myself as a sustainable consumer.”

“Consuming sustainable products is an important part of who I am.”

Most participants responded that they did not consider themselves to be a particularly sustainable consumer, and therefore it was not an important part of who they are.

Participants replied that although they may try their best to be sustainable, they would not necessarily be deterred from buying a product if it was not sustainable. Several students said that they would describe themselves as many other things before a sustainable consumer. They explained that although they try to do their best in this field, it is not a

main driver in their decision process. A couple participants also pointed out that it is difficult to be 100% sustainable, and referenced barriers like money, time, and product effectiveness.

Question 3:

“Conventional products are often more effective than products that are manufactured sustainably.”

The overwhelming response to this question was that it depends on the product and, more specifically, what they are looking for in this product. Participants provided several examples to help depict this point. They said that they consider products like EV or hybrid cars and organic makeup and beauty products to be higher quality than their less sustainable counterparts. However, for more everyday products like paper straws and organic cleaning spray, they said that they found the quality to be significantly lower than the less sustainable options in the market. A few students noted that even with lower quality products, they will still be inclined to use them because of the environmental benefits.

Question 4:

“I buy sustainable products even though the cost is high.”

For this question, participants once again stated that it depends on the product, the price difference, and the options for long term use. Most participants agreed that they would buy a more sustainable product if the long-term use made the price worth it, such as buying a reusable water bottle instead of continually purchasing disposable water bottles.

Even so, most participants explained that most of their purchase decisions are dependent on price, and therefore they would be unlikely to purchase a sustainable product that is more expensive. There was a general consensus to the statement, “If I could, I would spend more. But right now it’s just not in my budget.”

Question 5:

“I would be willing to stop buying products from companies that are guilty of polluting the environment, even though it might be inconvenient.”

Participants had many varying opinions on this question, but most of them agreed with the statement that, realistically, almost every company is guilty of polluting the environment to an extent. Students said that truly understanding the impact a company is having on the environment would take a lot of research and effort, so they are unlikely to know much about it unless it is a large scandal that makes the news. Additionally, participants said that they would be less likely to stop purchasing from a big brand such as Unilever even if they were found to be especially guilty, because it would disrupt so many of their purchasing habits. Some participants also found that it is easy to convince themselves that their small purchases would not have a significant impact on the company as a whole anyway. Some students cited examples of companies that they knew were guilty of being especially unsustainable but continued to purchase from anyway because of the convenience, price, or utility, such as SHEIN, Nestle, and Fair Life. Overall, most students agreed that it would have to take a very significant scandal accompanied with an insignificant product in order for them to stop their purchasing behavior.

Question 6:

“I usually verify the information given by the companies about their environmental impact / social impact.”

In response to this question, there was a unanimous consensus amongst participants that they rarely, if ever, verify the information presented by companies about their sustainability efforts. Students said that even though they are aware that many companies greenwash their marketing or present their sustainability process in a misleading way, they still would not go through the effort to research a company on their own unless their claims seemed extremely hard to believe. However, some students mentioned that the exception to this would be for brands that they put into or onto their body. Participants said they are more likely to research companies like food and beauty products because they see these as higher stakes since they have an impact on their body.

Question 7:

“I believe that purchasing sustainable products could make a significant positive impact on the environment.”

Opinions on this subject varied greatly between participants. Most agreed that if everyone collectively made the decision to purchase more sustainable products, then it would make a significant impact. However, some people said that they do not believe that their individual efforts make much of a difference, especially in the scope of big companies around the world. Other participants said that they felt if they changed their lifestyle then they could influence the people around them to make these changes too, thus creating a more significant impact over time.

Question 8:

“I think that if people were more educated on the issues of our environment and climate change, they would be more likely to purchase sustainable products.”

Collectively, all the participants' initial response to the question was that they believe people who are more educated on the issues of our environment and climate change would be more likely to purchase sustainable products. They said that people who are more aware of the problems would be more likely to take action about them, and would be more conscious of the negative effects that their behaviors may cause. However, some participants argued that the younger generation tends to care more about sustainability issues than the older generation, even if they may be less educated. One participant also brought up the point that higher educated people often make more money, and these people may choose to spend their money on products that exhibit luxury and comfort as a higher priority than sustainability. Overall though, the participants said that in most cases, more education would lead to a higher likelihood to purchase green products.

Question 9:

“Being a business student has affected my sustainable purchasing habits.”

The participants said that their business education has impacted how they think about sustainability in businesses, but has had little effect on their actual purchasing choices. The main impact that they discussed was having more knowledge about what to look for when evaluating a company's sustainability. They mentioned the positive effects of knowing to look for forms like company 10K's, and being aware of greenwashing. Some

participants also mentioned that marketing classes particularly had been helpful in this regard because they learned how companies may portray sustainability efforts in an over-representative or unethical way. Still, participants agreed that they are no more likely to actually make sustainable purchase decisions because of this knowledge. Some students listed other factors that they thought had been a bigger influence, such as family and friends, community environment, news, and social media.

Question 10:

“What are the biggest barriers preventing you from shopping more sustainably?”

The overwhelming majority of participants identified price as the biggest barrier preventing them from shopping more sustainably. The other factors that they mentioned were product effectiveness, accuracy or trustworthiness of information, and lack of convenience.

Discussion

The responses from the focus groups are an important addition to the existing research surrounding YCEC’ motivations and barriers for purchasing environmentally-friendly products.

Some significant quotes from participants were:

“It’s hard to measure how much better a product is for the environment. Certain products’ perceived impacts don’t seem as great.”

“I’ll buy a more sustainable product only if the cost is lower or the long-term use will be worth it.”

“I like to think I’m a sustainable buyer but I probably don’t look into it as much as I should.”

“I hope to be more sustainable when I have more money but right now I don’t really have an option.”

“Some products are not sustainable even though they say they are.”

These quotes help depict some of the main themes that were brought up during these focus groups. Firstly, it was found that most participants thought that sustainable products tend to be less effective than their counterparts. However, several people pointed out that this depends greatly on the product type and category. Secondly, it was found that the main reason the participants avoid purchasing sustainable products is due to their higher prices. Thirdly, many participants said they think it is difficult to trust companies’ marketing communications about sustainability due to such a high portion of greenwashing in the market and their own business education backgrounds. This made them wary of products that display lots of messaging about their sustainability as they’ve seen this proven untrue in the past. Fourthly, participants thought that although sustainability knowledge will increase purchase intentions it does not necessarily follow through to purchase decisions. For example, some people said that sustainable knowledge would not be a big enough factor to override high prices. Finally, it was found that participants perceived their generation (and all the younger generations) to be more aware of the importance of sustainable behavior, but have less means to act on this awareness than previous generations.

Although there are similarities between the findings of the present study and the results from previous studies investigated in my literature review, there are some differences as well. Most importantly, the results of the current study show that social influence and sustainable knowledge are far less important factors in sustainable purchase decisions than product pricing and product quality. The perspective of a college student therefore differs from the general population when it comes to sustainability. If companies want to try to better reach this demographic in the future, the most important factor to focus on is price. If companies can create and market sustainable products that will pay off in price in the long run, YCEC will be much more likely to purchase them. Additionally, marketers should focus on promoting the effectiveness of their sustainable products, as many participants said they often choose to purchase conventional products due to their utilitarian values. Finally, companies should focus on making accurate information about their sustainability efforts more readily available to the public. Participants felt information availability was a significant barrier, as they were often unmotivated to go through the effort to find accurate information about each company online. Additionally, marketers should focus on presenting their sustainability efforts in a more substantial and supported way to alleviate consumer concerns about greenwashing. For instance, they could include QR codes on their packaging that will link to their company's full and unbiased sustainability reports. Together these efforts should have a positive impact on sustainable purchase behavior for undergraduate business students.

Limitations

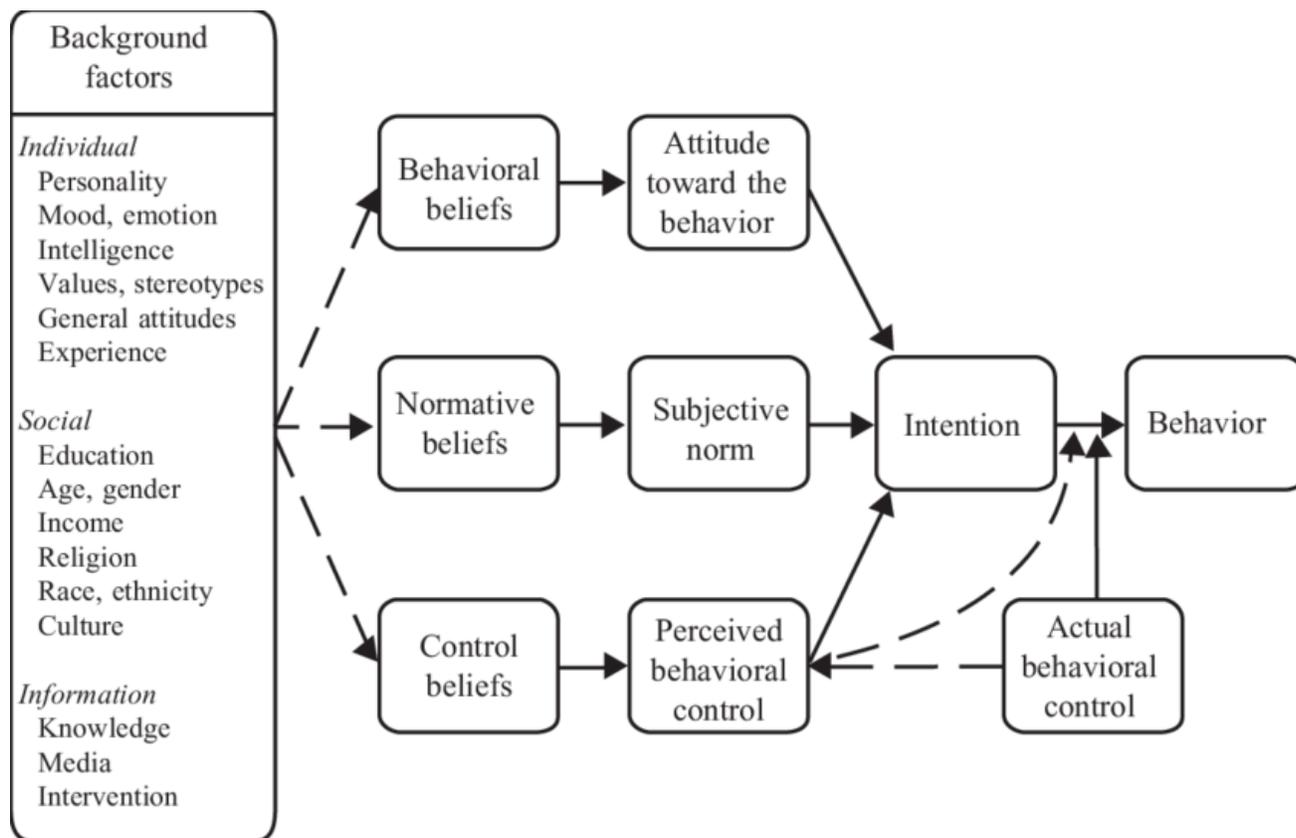
Although every effort was made to conduct the study accurately and thoroughly, there are several limitations that should be noted. There are some limitations of all focus group research that could have affected this study. One challenge of all focus groups is the potential for a dominant individual(s) in a focus group to influence the overall results (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This would mean that the results may be less representative of the whole group and more representative of one, or a few, dominant voices. Another challenge typical of focus groups is that if participants are asked questions about topics or behaviors where they have little experience, they may invent plausible answers rather than admitting their lack of knowledge (Krueger & Casey, 2015). If this situation occurred during any of the focus groups in this study, it may have reduced the accuracy of the results provided. A final limitation for my study is that the sample population may not have been entirely representative of the whole. Participants were offered an incentive to join the focus groups, so this may have attracted a specific subset of students that may have different opinions than the general undergraduate business student population.

Further Research Opportunities

Results of this study present opportunities for further research in this field of interest. One potential next step is to conduct an experiment where undergraduate business students are presented with varying product choices, and must decide between sustainability and other tradeoffs. This would be an important next step because it would push the research from investigating sustainable purchase motivations and thoughts to actual behavior.

Another option for future research is to conduct similar studies with different majors. It would be interesting to see if some students, such as those pursuing degrees in fields like environmental science, may be more or less likely to make sustainable purchase decisions than business students. Alternatively, the research could be expanded to investigate YCEC at different universities around the world to see what impact location may have on consumer tendencies. This study could be used for further research in many different ways as it provides a foundation for several different areas of research regarding sustainable purchase decisions.

Appendix A: The Theory of Planned Behavior



(Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005)

Appendix B: Research Information Sheet

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a college student currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Business. This study is being conducted by Danielle Meader at the University of Vermont.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand consumer purchase behavior for environmentally-friendly products in a population of YCEC. The core issue to be investigated is the motivations for sustainable product purchase behavior in students pursuing a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. Additionally, this study will attempt to make an inference about how to apply this knowledge towards more effective marketing for sustainable products in the future.

Study Procedures

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to participate in a mini focus group of 5-6 participants. In this study, there will be one pilot focus group to refine the questions and procedure used, and two main focus groups afterwards. You will be asked open-ended questions about your sustainable product purchase behavior,

including one warm up question and five specific questions pertaining to the study. If needed, you will have the option of not answering some of the questions and still remaining in the study. The focus group is expected to take approximately one hour, and will take place in a reserved room within the business school. The focus groups will be led by a moderator and observed by a note taker. Responses will be audio recorded, and notes and recordings of the groups will be subsequently analyzed to identify main themes and important issues.

Benefits

As a participant in this research study, there may not be any direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

Risks

We will do our best to protect the information we collect from you and avoid any potential risk for an accidental breach of confidentiality. Your academic standing will not be affected by your decision to participate or not.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

Compensation

You will not be paid for taking part in this study. However, you may receive points towards your Professional Engagement & Knowledge Systems (PEAKS) badges for participating.

Confidentiality

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be stored without any identifiers. No one will be able to match you to your answers.

Focus group statement: In the focus groups, questions are directed to the group, not to individuals. You have the right to not answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time in the process. We will ask that everyone in the group not repeat what they have heard others say, but there is always the chance that someone will repeat what you have said. Everything you say will be kept confidential by the researchers.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. You may choose not to take part in this study, or if you decide to take part, you can change your mind later and withdraw from the study.

Data is de-identified at time of collection and therefore, your data cannot be withdrawn from the study and will be used.

Questions

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me, Danielle Meader, at the following phone number: (207) 894 - 0580. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact the Director of the Research Protections Office at (802) 656-5040.

Appendix C: Interview Guide

“In the next hour, I’m going to ask a series of questions. Questions are directed to the group, not to individuals. You have the right to not answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time in the process. We will ask that everyone in the group try not repeat what they have heard others say. Everything you say will be kept confidential by myself.

The subject of this focus group is sustainable products, so before we begin I just want to give a little refresher. When I ask about sustainable products in this study, I’m referring to products that provide environmental, social and economic benefits over their whole life cycle, from the extraction of raw materials until the final disposal. Does that definition make sense?

I’m also going to list a few examples of sustainable products you may be familiar with just to get us started. Of course, there are many other examples, and I encourage you to

think outside of just these ones if you can. So some examples are: eco-friendly or compostable utensils and straws; reusable grocery bags; thrifted or recycled clothes; reusable water bottles; LED light bulbs; energy efficient washers and dryers; electric vehicles; eco-friendly cleaning products; non-toxic makeup products; organic deodorant, etc.

We're going to start today with a warm up question.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (1-9)?

Question 1 (Warm-Up) I think of myself as a sustainable consumer.

Question 2) Consuming sustainable products is an important part of who I am (Mai, 2019).

Question 3) Conventional products are often more effective than products that are manufactured sustainably (Mai, 2019).

Question 4) I buy sustainable products even though the cost is high (Rusyani, 2021).

Question 5) I would be willing to stop buying products from companies that are guilty of polluting the environment, even though it might be inconvenient (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020).

Question 6) I usually verify the information given by the companies about their environmental impact / social impact (Hosta & Zabkar, 2020).

Question 7) I believe that purchasing sustainable products could make a significant positive impact on the environment.

Question 8) I think that if people were more educated on the issues of our environment and climate change, they would be more likely to purchase sustainable products.

Question 9) Being a business student has affected my sustainable purchasing habits.

Question 10) What are the biggest barriers preventing you from shopping more sustainably?

Thank you very much for your time and participation.”

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