

Green Consumerism:  
Moral Motivations to a Sustainable Future

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**Abstract**

Green consumerism embodies a dilemma inherent in many prosocial and moral actions – foregoing personal gain in favor of a more abstract, somewhat intangible gain to someone or something else. In addition, as in the case of purchasing more expensive green products, there is sometimes a very literal cost that may act as a barrier to engaging in green consumerism. The current review examines endogenous, exogenous, and structural factors that promote green consumerism. We also discuss its potential positive and negative spillover effects. We close by discussing areas of research on green consumerism that are lacking - such as the moral framing of green consumerism and the expansion of the cultural context in which it is defined and studied.

Keywords: morality, prosociality, consumer behavior, personality, licensing, compensation

As global temperatures rise and natural resources grow scarcer, sustainable or “green” consumer behaviors occupy an increasingly important role in promoting environmental awareness and reducing per-capita greenhouse emissions. The latest report by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggests that changes in lifestyle, diet and reduced energy consumption can have substantial impact in mitigating environmental degradation (1). However, as the past half-century of psychological, economic, and behavioral research on prosocial behavior has shown, this sort of change is easier said than done. Green consumerism embodies the dilemma inherent in many prosocial and moral actions – foregoing personal gain in favor of a more abstract, perhaps somewhat intangible gain to someone or something else (2). This tradeoff is part of what makes prosocial and moral behavior of any sort so difficult; there is an initial cost, sometimes a very literal cost as in the case of purchasing more expensive green products that may act as a barrier to engaging in green consumerism. Nonetheless there are several recurring themes in the expanse of literature on the topic of green consumerism, which may shine a light on ways to promote green consumerism.

#### *What is Green Consumerism?*

Oxymoronic implications aside<sup>i</sup>, green consumerism is, for a significant portion of the Western industrial population, an accessible way to engage in pro-environmental, sustainable behavior. An operational definition of green consumerism subsumes a list of behaviors that are undertaken with the intention of promoting positive environmental effects<sup>ii</sup>. Some prototypical behaviors that fall within this rather vague definition are purchasing appliances with energy star labels, buying organic products, or turning off electrical appliances when not in use, and taking shorter showers.

Considering consumers’ pro-environmental motivations, it is worth asking what effect their green behaviors have on environmental sustainability. If one considers a free market perspective, purchasing “greener” products may be a means for consumers to vote with their pocketbooks (3), leading to large-scale environmental benefits via systemic policy changes (e.g., car-makers self-instituting policies to manufacture more fuel-efficient cars; see (4)). From a psychological perspective, recent evidence suggests that relatively low-cost green behaviors

such as buying green products might act as a gateway to more significant and more committal pro-environmental behavior, such as habitual recycling or expressing support for alternative energy sources (5,6). So, for the most part it appears that green consumerism has a neutral to positive impact on the environment (for important caveats, see Section 6).

For around the last four decades, consumer psychology has devoted attention to the factors that lead people to buy environment-friendly products and engage in other forms of green consumerism. We begin our empirical review with the internal psychological processes that influence people's green consumerism. These are perhaps the best studied and consist of concepts such as consumer values. We then move to a second level of influence and examine the role that external social cues have in green consumerism. Finally, we review macro-level structural features that may promote green consumerism (see Figure 1). We close by discussing potential future directions for research on green consumerism, including, for example, examining how the moral framing of the construct in the first place might generate unwanted impact on the environment.

#### I. *Endogenous Factors*

##### *Values, Attitudes, & Identity*

Much of the psychological research examining the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior uncover a value-action gap. Research suggests that while a majority of people might endorse pro-environmental beliefs, few would be willing to forego price, convenience and ease in favor of a product's "greenness" (7–10). However, support is also found for rationalist approaches, showing a consistency between environmental attitudes, identity, and some types of green purchases (11). For instance, in some studies, an aggregate measure of "environmental consciousness" is more predictive of green purchasing intentions than demographic or personality variables (12). In others, only *particular* kinds of pro-environmental beliefs (e.g., those about product packaging or labeling) appear to predict green consumerism but not engagement in recycling or other environment-friendly actions (13). This finding seems to suggest that green purchases may be a distinct type of pro-environmental

behavior, one that may possess a separate set of antecedents from behaviors such as recycling, using public transportation, or participating in environmental activism (14\*\*,15).

### *Perceived Effectiveness and Hope*

Other cognitive variables, such as consumers' belief in the efficacy of their individual behavior on the environment, have been shown to reliably impact subsequent green consumerism (16–18\*). Interestingly, this appears to be the result of a more generalized internal locus of control (i.e., not particular to the environmental domain); for example, respondents who were less likely to believe in the role of luck or other external influences in their life were more willing to choose a more environment-friendly laundry detergent over a conventional one (19).

Finally, researchers have found that the cognitive construct, hope, impacts green consumerism. The rhetoric of global climate change can often consist, by necessity, of dire and ominous predictions (20\*). Unfortunately, this may have the (unintended) consequence of instilling a sense of fatalistic helplessness in some (21), leading to a decrease in environmental engagement. The antidote appears to be a sense of constructive optimism – believing that the future is positive and believing that one has a potential path to that future (22,23). This construction of hope combines cognitive (e.g., agency) and emotional (e.g., positive feeling) perspectives and motivates pro-environmental behavior, particularly among young adults - even when controlling for the types of values described in the previous section (24\*,25).

## *II. Exogenous Factors*

### *Social Norms*

In addition to personal norms that people embody, social norms play a large part in encouraging green consumerism (26). Field experiments set in hotels used a variety of appeals to persuade guests to reuse their towels (27,28). Appeals that invoked social norms (e.g., "Join your fellow citizens in helping to save the environment.") were more successful than direct appeals (e.g., "Help the hotel save energy.") or ones centering on cooperation (e.g., "Partner with us to help save the environment."). Peer group behavior may also be an effective route to increasing the salience of green norms and hence, encouraging green consumerism. Social

psychological research into conformity has shown that people often change their own behavior to adapt to normative standards set by one's social group. Similar processes appear to affect green consumerism (29). For instance, the adoption of solar photovoltaic cells is dependent on how pervasive this technology is in one's neighborhood (30\*\*); consumers who see their neighbors choosing to buy green products may be more likely to do the same.

### *Conspicuous Conservation*

Green consumerism appears to be influenced by social norms that push for conformity but recent evidence suggests that it can also serve as a signaling device for attaining social status or a prosocial reputation. "Conspicuous conservation" behaviors indicate to others that an actor is able and willing to incur personal costs (because green products sometimes entail a pecuniary premium – at least at the onset) for the betterment of society (31–33). This perspective suggests that green consumerism should be more likely in public rather than private settings, and, it indeed appears that when the behavior is public (vs. private) individuals are willing to pay more to uphold a common environmental resource and show a preference for green products relative to conventional ones (34). Note, however, that the need to demonstrate one's commitment to conservation action is only active if the consumer herself or the group she cares about believes that the environment is in need of saving. Sexton and Sexton (32) recently demonstrated the interaction between environmental values and social signaling: the value of a green signal (e.g., the purchase of a distinctive hybrid vehicle) was several times greater in a city with demonstrable green values than in a comparable "brown" city<sup>iii</sup>.

### *III. Structural Factors*

Despite the myriad factors that may influence and motivate it, green consumerism is viewed as a difficult undertaking. It can be costly in the short-term (e.g., purchasing solar panels) and may require sacrifices (e.g., longer walkways for using public transportation) and mindfulness (e.g., remembering to bring your own bag to the market). Some of these barriers to green consumerism may be addressed by restructuring the landscape in which green consumer choices are currently made (35). Much of the economic literature on environmental

behavior assesses the impact of tax or other financial incentives or sanctions in motivating green product purchases (e.g., a tax credit for installing solar panels or a plastic bag fee in stores, or banning incandescent light bulbs). In the behavioral sciences, however, research has examined the role choice architecture or nudges may play in increasing green consumerism.

Thaler and Sunstein's (36) influential book "Nudge" drew attention to subtle ways prosocial consumerism (e.g., organ donation) can be affected using well-known judgment and decision-making paradigms (e.g., status quo bias or anchoring effects). Similar mechanisms may affect green consumerism. For instance, modifying the choice architecture, such as by making a 50/50 mix of renewable and carbon-based energy sources the default option for new electricity service customers may increase green consumption (37\*\*). Other types of potentially successful nudges include information feedback and framing of information. For example, households that were given negative feedback about their energy consumption relative to others (e.g., "Last month you used 20% more energy than your neighbors.") were more likely to subsequently reduce their consumption (38). Similarly, a suggested change in behavior to reduce electricity consumption could be framed in terms of the money one would save and the positive impact on the environment (gain) or in terms of the money that one is leaving on the table and the environmental damage (loss) if one does not change behavior – a subtle change that alters the conceptualization of green consumption (39,40).

#### *IV. Positive & Negative Spillovers*

In some instances, green consumerism may have the undesirable effect of actually increasing carbon emissions or diminishing other types of environmental gains. Research on spillover, licensing, rebound or boomerang effects sheds some light on when positive green intentions or actions may have undesirable outcomes (41\*\*).

On the one hand, environmental behaviors have the potential to create positive spillover effects, such as when the initial adoption of smaller green behaviors (e.g., the purchase of green consumer products) increases support for larger green projects further down the road (such as the adoption of wind energy; 5\*). On the other hand, environmental behaviors can allow individuals to feel morally licensed and subsequently behave less

prosocially. For example, households that managed to conserve water subsequently increased their energy consumption, and recycling decreased people's likelihood of using reusable grocery bags (42\*,43). In another study by Mazar and Zhong (45), participants who were randomly assigned to purchase products from a green rather than a conventional store subsequently not only acted less altruistically but also more unethically to earn more money.

Hope is not lost, however, as recent research has begun to identify the cases in which negative versus positive spillovers occur. In particular, focusing on a long-term commitment, highlighting identity or societal obligations, and providing psychological closure (46) might be effective solutions to fight negative spillover effects and promoting continued pro-environmental behavior (46,47\*). For instance, the extent to which one focuses on self-motivated reasons to engage in pro-environmental behaviors may predict whether positive or negative spillover may occur. In addition, pro-environmental behaviors that are performed for self-transcending reasons rather than self-interested ones appear to increase other green behavior (49).

#### V. *Future Directions*

One effective, albeit counter-intuitive, path to promoting sustainable practices might be to remove green consumption from the domain of morality altogether. A green behavior that is viewed as a conventional norm and/or becomes habitual rather than an effortful, personal sacrifice (i.e., a morally-motivated action) may not earn moral credits or credentials (50) and hence reduce subsequent licensing. In other words, consumers might be more likely to engage in green consumerism if they think of it as a "conventional" behavior or it becomes automatic (51).

In addition, it appears that a great majority of studies suffers from an over-reliance of perspectives from WEIRD populations (52)<sup>iv</sup>, failing to consider viable routes to sustainability in other cultural/socio-demographic contexts. Green consumerism has often been framed as a "hierarchy-of-needs" issue where consumers from developing nations cannot afford to consider the ethical implications of their purchases (53). Thus, research on the practice of green consumerism in non-WEIRD populations is needed – both for greater theoretical



understanding, as well as for applied purposes. Massive population growth combined with an increasing demand for consumer goods suggests that developing economies are where researchers should focus future investigations. Substantial environmental benefits could be reaped by modestly shifting consumption patterns away from conventional products to sustainably-produced ones (54). Green consumerism is a culturally-learned, context-dependent behavior and further research outside of traditional research populations could help develop strategies for matching green consumerism (and accompanying marketing communication) with specific contexts and cultures (53–57\*).

A more inclusive approach to green consumer behaviors would also involve shifting the focus from an individual consumer as the decision-maker to a family, a community or other unit of actors. Relatedly, the conceptualization of green consumerism would need to be broadened in order to be inclusive of diverse social, economic, and ecological constraints. For instance, in some communities, engaging in urban food-growing movements rather than purchasing organic food might represent green consumerism. Considering a diversity of cultural, socio-economic and ideological backgrounds will further enable research in green consumerism to contribute to a sustainable environmental future.

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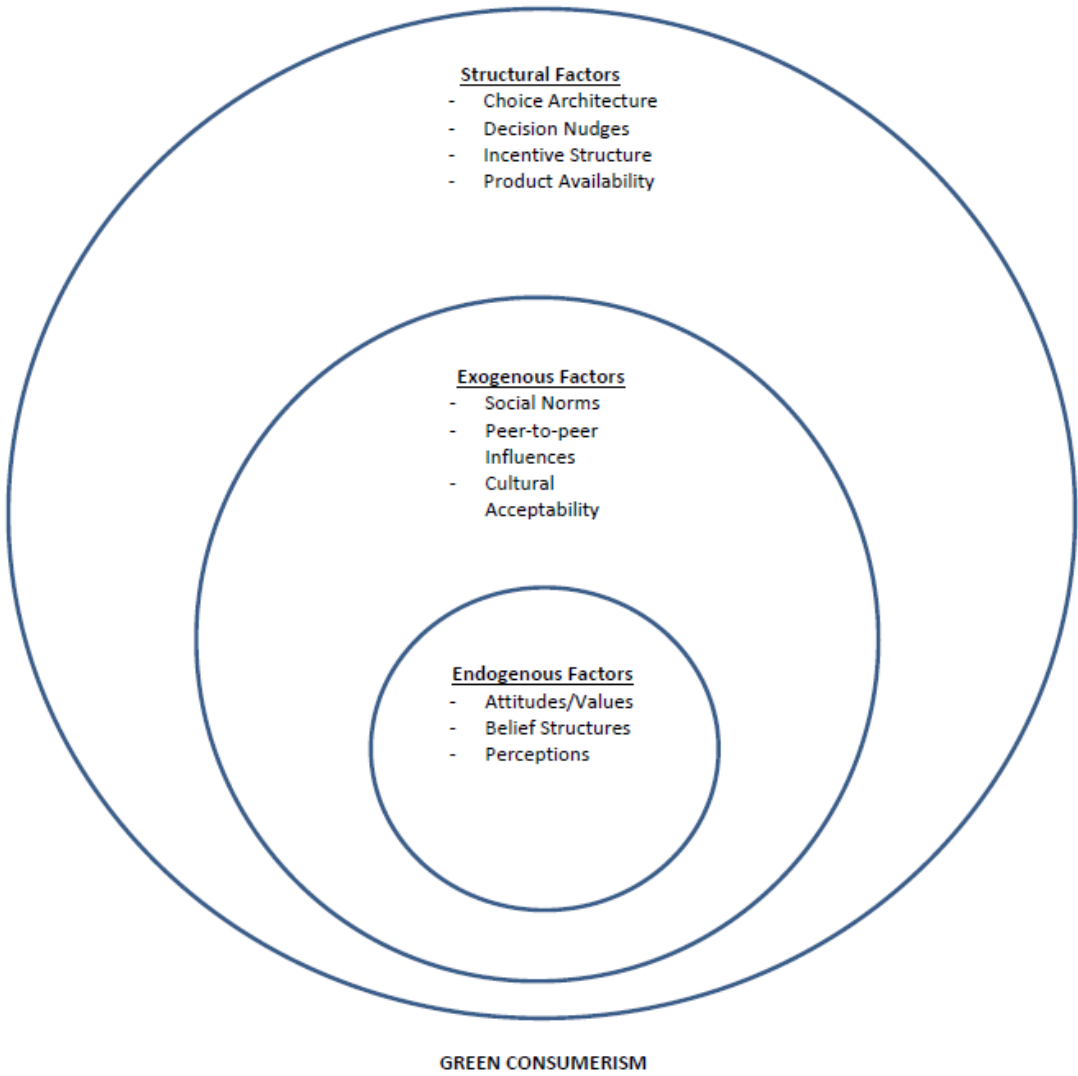
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Figure 1





### Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> See Goodland & Daly, 1996; Dauvergne, 2010; Mont & Plepys, 2008; Peattie, 2010; Wilk, 2002 for a discussion on the inherent tension between consumerism and sustainability

<sup>ii</sup> Of course, green consumer choices need not be made *solely* on the basis of perceived positive environmental effects. Some purchases, like those of organic, locally-made foods, for instance, could be made on the basis of considerations such as health, taste, or quality. Similarly fair-trade products, while better for the environment, may be motivated by other factors such as general concern for the welfare of the fieldworkers (Grunert, Hieke & Wills, 2014).

<sup>iii</sup> It is worth pointing out that this finding in particular indicates an interaction between endogenous and exogenous factors motivating green consumerism. Indeed, each of the levels described in this review should not be seen as mutually exclusive but rather as concomitant.

<sup>iv</sup> A convenient acronym for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic – the population from which the majority of social science researchers that publish in the major journals recruit their participants.