



Making a Difference: Motivating Sustainable Consumption Behavior to be Consistent with Attitude

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Introduction

Consumers are increasingly conscious about the world and the impact of their consumption. A recent McKinsey report revealed that 67% of consumers consider the use of sustainable material to be an important purchasing factor (Granskog et al., 2020). However, the actual purchase behavior and the market share of socially responsible brands do not match such results. A recent survey reported that 65% of consumers want to buy brands that advocate sustainability, yet only about 26% actually do so (White et al., 2019).

The previous studies suggested several reasons for the gap between attitude and behavior: price, quality, convenience (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000), a lack of availability, and a lack of information (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). However, these reasons are mostly restricted to external factors such as product attributes or situational reasons including convenience and product availability. This study proposes an internal belief that can cause the attitude-behavior gap as the implicit theory of individuals (Dweck et al., 1995). Applying the implicit theory that suggests people have different internal beliefs about the malleability of the target, this study aims to examine if an individual's belief about the malleability of the world will create the attitude-behavioral intention gap in sustainable consumption.

Literature Review

The implicit theory refers to the internal belief that people have about the malleability of personal characteristics (Dweck et al., 1995). It includes two inclinations: entity and incremental theories. The entity theory interprets an attribute as a collection of fixed traits that can be measured and evaluated. Entity theory does not believe that they can change the outcomes with effort. On the other hand, the incremental theory projects the system of individuals as malleable and evolving over time through efforts. The incremental theorists believe that the outcome can be improved according to the effort. Therefore, the implicit theory of individuals results in different goal orientations, behavior patterns, and reactions to the problem (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). For instance, implicit theories about one's body shape influence the attitude for plus-size models (Cinelli & Yang, 2016). Specifically, when overweight participants were shown a product advertised by plus-size models, entity theorists revealed a negative attitude toward the plus-size model while incremental theorists exhibited a positive attitude because they believed the body size can be changed.

This study extends the implicit theory to the inconsistency between attitude and behavioral intention for sustainable consumption. If entity theorists do not believe that the world

(e.g. environment, society) is malleable and can be improved with effort, their intention for action may be falling behind the positive attitude. However, incremental theorists who believe that the world is something to be changed are likely to expect higher effectiveness on the outcome and take more action.

H1. The incremental theorists for the world are likely to exhibit greater behavioral intention than those who have an entity theory.

H2. The incremental theorists for the world are likely to exhibit a smaller gap between the attitude and behavior than those who have an entity theory.

Method

An online survey was conducted using previously validated measures. One hundred and sixty participants whose age is older than 18 years and who is currently living in the US were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. After a short description of fair-trade coffee in relation to sustainable consumption, the participants answered questions regarding attitude, purchase intention, and implicit theory about the world. All items were adopted from existing studies (Dweck et al., 1995; Kwon et al., 2016; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008), and were measured on a 7-point Likert scale. All measurements demonstrated acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha=0.93, 0.78, 0.95$).

Results

To test the hypotheses, participants were divided into entity group and incremental group using median split of the implicit theory measure. An ANOVA revealed that Implicit theory had significant main effects on purchase intention ($F(1, 157)=5.29, p<0.05$). As hypothesized, increment theories exhibited higher purchase intention compared to the entity theorists ($M_{Inc}=5.31, M_{Ent}=4.52$). Further, to test how sustainability attitude ties into this effect, participants were divided into higher attitude group and lower attitude group using the median split of the attitude measure. The results showed a marginally significant interaction effect of implicit theory and attitude on purchase intention ($F(1, 157)=3.04, p=0.08$). Specifically, while entity theory participants exhibited a minimal change in purchase intention despite their attitude toward sustainability ($M_{high} = 4.44, M_{low}=4.67$), increment theory participants exhibited much greater purchase intention when holding a more positive attitude toward sustainability ($M_{high} = 5.78, M_{low}=4.67$).

Findings and Implications

The result found that the positive increase in attitude resulted in a greater increase in purchase intention for incremental theorists compared to a smaller increase for entity theorists. It can be interpreted that the incremental theorists are likely to purchase sustainable products more when they have a highly positive attitude than less positive attitude. On the other hand, the entity theorists are not expected to increase their purchase intention because of the positive attitudinal change, exhibiting an attitude-behavior gap. The findings suggest that the attitude-intention gap in sustainable consumption can be caused by individuals' belief in the malleability of the world.

When consumers believe the environment or society is changeable, they are likely to take sustainable actions in consistent with their attitude. However, if they think the world is fixed and cannot be improved with efforts, they may not act sustainably despite with a positive attitude. Therefore, it implies that assuring consumers about the possibility of difference that can be made from the consumption will reduce the gap between attitude and behavior.

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