

GREEN CONSUMER PROFILES: INFLUENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN AND SPECIFIC PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES: PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents some fresh insights in green profiling of consumers. Based on literature review the author posits profiles to be investigated where consumers with high level of environmental concern make unconditional purchase while consumers with low level of environmental concern give more importance to product attributes (benefits & risks associated with the products) and hence make conditional purchase. Some unconcerned consumers make accidental purchase due to parity with green and non- green products attributes.

Keywords: Green Consumerism, Environmental Concern, Green product attributes, Green profiles

INTRODUCTION

A recent report by Deloitte consulting on Consumer 2020 states that while a majority of consumers today are showing their willingness to “buy green”, their purchase is still mainly dictated by price, quality and convenience rather than sustainability – “the disconnect between awareness and action is stark”. Empirical evidences support the contention that environmental concern is a major factor in consumer decision making (Diamantopoulos, et al 2003) but it is not the only reason for the customers to purchase an environmentally friendly product .Consumers are not willing to compromise on functionality of the product so it is imperative that they perform competitively with non-green products (Diamantopoulos, et al 2003) Consumers are willing to spend extra money for a socially desirable concept like environmentalism, but “green” matters very little when compared to price, quality and convenience; also consumers are willing to engage in environmentally friendly behavior only when the economic benefit is perceived as higher than the nonmonetary costs (Mainieri et al; 1997) Apart from benefits the perception of inconvenience has a great influence on consumers’ action. Any product that requires a significant amount of compromise is not likely to succeed (McCarty et al;1994) Consumers in general are not willing to forgo comfort and quality lifestyles for the betterment of the environment and society (Bamberg, et al; 2003) Ottman (1992) proposed role of product attributes to understand the process from intention to actual behavior. He reported that consumers accepted green products when their primary need for performance, quality, convenience, and affordability were met,

and when they understood how a green product could help to solve environmental problems.

Mainieri (et al. 1997) posited that consumers with a stronger concern for the environment are more likely to purchase products as a result of their environmental claims, than those who are less concerned about the environmental issues. Several authors have found an individual's environmental concern level to be a useful predictor in an environmentally conscious recycling behavior (Arbuthnot, 1975) while many found it useful predictor for green buying behavior. (Ricky Y.K. Chan, 2000) while earlier studies have majorly researched environmental behavior as a function of Intention which in turn is outcome of environmental knowledge and environmental attitude, very few researchers have explored the importance of product attributes in understanding consumer behavior and green purchase decision. The author proposes green profiles based on the importance given to product attributes in purchase decisions by otherwise acclaimed environmentally conscious and concerned consumers.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Do consumers with high concern purchase green products?

Do consumers with high concern compromise with quality, price functionality and make unconditional purchase?

Does level of environmental concern impact type of purchase made?

Do consumers with moderate concern make conditional purchase that is only when their primary need for performance quality convenience and affordability are met?

Do consumers not concerned at all also make green purchase?

Do perceived benefits lead to green purchase?

Do perceived risks associated with green products hinder green product acceptance?

Do consumers accidentally make green purchases as some products are at Par with Non green products?

Can new consumer profiles emerge out of answers to these questions?

3. GREEN CONSUMER PROFILES

Under the broad definition of green consumerism, consumers voluntarily contribute to environmental interests by making rational decisions in their purchase, usage and disposal (Shepherd,1992) these rational decisions are tempered through varying degrees of influences and interests. (Shepherd, 1992) These varying degrees of influences and interests could suggest various green profiles of consumers. Relevant

studies based on Green purchase behavior of consumers confirm that purchasing criteria for these consumers goes beyond the usual consuming models (Ioannis et al). Prominent purchase behavior amongst others is showing disapproval of even technically sound products which otherwise would have adverse consequences in the environment (Drucker, 1973; Bernstein, 1992; Peattie, 1995; Peattie, 1999).

Most of the profiling attempts have been to label the consumers according to demographic, socioeconomic and psychographic characteristics.

Demographic characterization of consumers has not been enough to determine profiles of consumers (D'Souza et al, 2007) but useful information in terms of gender influences, relation between age and green behavior, Income and environmental attitudes (Kinner et al, 1974) and literacy levels and their sensitivity towards environmental issues have been studied by various authors (Straughan & Roberts, 1999). Demographic profiling generally showed consumers educated, with higher income, women as greener than men and young consumers greener (Peattie, 1992).

Psychographic and behavioral influences have been very popular mainly Attitude, Knowledge, Intention paradigm. Theory of reasoned action and its improved version theory of planned behavior have been the most sought after theories on which various authors have built their theoretical frameworks. Conclusion drawn from most of these studies is that environmental Intent does not lead to actual behavior claiming consideration of many factors which have been neglected. (Bodur & Sarigollu, 2005) As pointed out by some authors in emerging economies where consumer population is complex and actually diverse contextual and situational determinants shape choices. Depending on their overall behavior some researchers have developed new intermediate categories of green consumers such as 'light' versus 'dark green' or 'shallow' versus 'Deep greens' (Dermody, 1999). Consumers have also been classified as green or grey (Etzioni, 1998) as recyclers and non-recyclers (De young; 1989) based on their behaviors. Some researchers have made categories of Intention based hypothetical behaviors while some have made actual purchase based profiles.

Purchase Patterns: Few authors (Gunter, 1992) have examined green profiles based on consumer purchase patterns. The Consumers are divided into four groups, heavy user, medium users, light users and non-users. Other aspects like purchase patterns of brand loyal consumers in terms of frequency of purchase, substitution products, product usage are also examined. (Art Weinstein, 1994) Previous research has indicated that there are clear segments of green consumers based on level of greenness.

Product Attributes: Perceived Product Price & Quality as a moderating variable in purchase decision has been studied by Afzaal et al (2012) concluding that they are ready to buy green products more often, but they expect green products to be competitive in terms of product price and quality, just like the traditional products. A classic definition of green consumer (Henion K.E, 1976) describes them as 'environmentally concerned

consumers'. The product price factor has always been an important factor in consumer buying process and consumers always examine price and brand name information to compare products and to make judgments along with dimensions of other product attributes. So even if the consumer is environmentally concerned his purchase decision will be considerably influenced not by his knowledge or attitude but by the perceived product attributes of green product.

This study proposes that level of environmental concern may determine the level of greenness in terms of green purchase behavior. Though environmental concern has been considered as important predictor of environmentally conscious behavior its correlation with presence of specific product attributes leading to conditional or unconditional purchase has not been explored so far. The author proposes fresh profiles based on this proposition to be investigated.

4. PROFILES PROPOSED

Environmental Concern and product attributes: Consumers in general will purchase products and services with a mix of attributes including environmental attributes that maximizes their utility (Christopher Gan, 2008) Consumers' willingness and decision to act green are based on perceived economic benefits and economic costs (mainieri,1997) so consumers will act green only if they perceive that individual benefits exceed costs (Hansla et al; 2008). Green hardly matters to consumers when compared to price, quality and convenience (mainieri,1997) generally perceived risks and costs associated with green products in terms of quality, price, lack of information (D'Souza et al 2007), lack of credibility, lack of confidence, Inconvenience, distrust, low functionality are reasons identified for reluctance towards green products. Only highly concerned consumers and not all consumers are willing to purchase the environmentally friendly products within certain constraints (Christopher Gan, 2008) implying that consumers will generally derive greater utility from price and quality attributes than environmental attributes alone. Also, even if the consumers are concerned about the environment, huge differentials and inconveniences associated (Christopher Gan, 2008) with green products may deter consumers from buying them. Based on these contentions the following profiles are proposed.

4.1 Proposed Green Consumer Profiles

Degree/Level of concern	Basis of Purchase	Type of purchase
Moderate Concern	(Rational) Concern + benefit	Conditional -Intentional Purchase
High Concern	(Emotional) Pure Concern	Unconditional -Intentional purchase
Low Concern	(Pure benefit) No Concern	Conditional - Unintentional Purchase
No Concern	Accidental Purchase due to parity	Unconditional-Unintentional purchase
No Concern	Pure risks No concern	Conditional -Intentional No purchase

Table no. 1 Proposed Green Consumer Profiles based on degree of concern, basis of purchase and type of purchase.

(Refer Fig 1) The first 2 profiles are impacted by environmental concern, but the degree of concern determines the influence of product attributes on purchase intention. Where the degree environmental concern is moderate rational purchase is likely to occur. Even though the consumer is concerned, the purchase will be based on the perceived benefit associated and presence of specific attributes rather than concern. If the environmental concern is high the consumer will indulge into emotional and unconditional purchase. The next 2 profiles are not impacted by environmental concern at all, but by the presence of specific product attributes .Even if the environmental concern is low the consumer purchases green products because of pure benefit associated with it. For example a consumer not concerned about the environment may purchase a CFL bulb due to energy efficiency or may purchase a hybrid car due to fuel efficiency and not environmental concern. The last profile is not impacted by environmental concern and is negatively influenced by risks associated with green product attributes and hence rejects green purchase. (The last profile is not depicted as purchase is not made)

4.1.2 Consumer profile matrix:

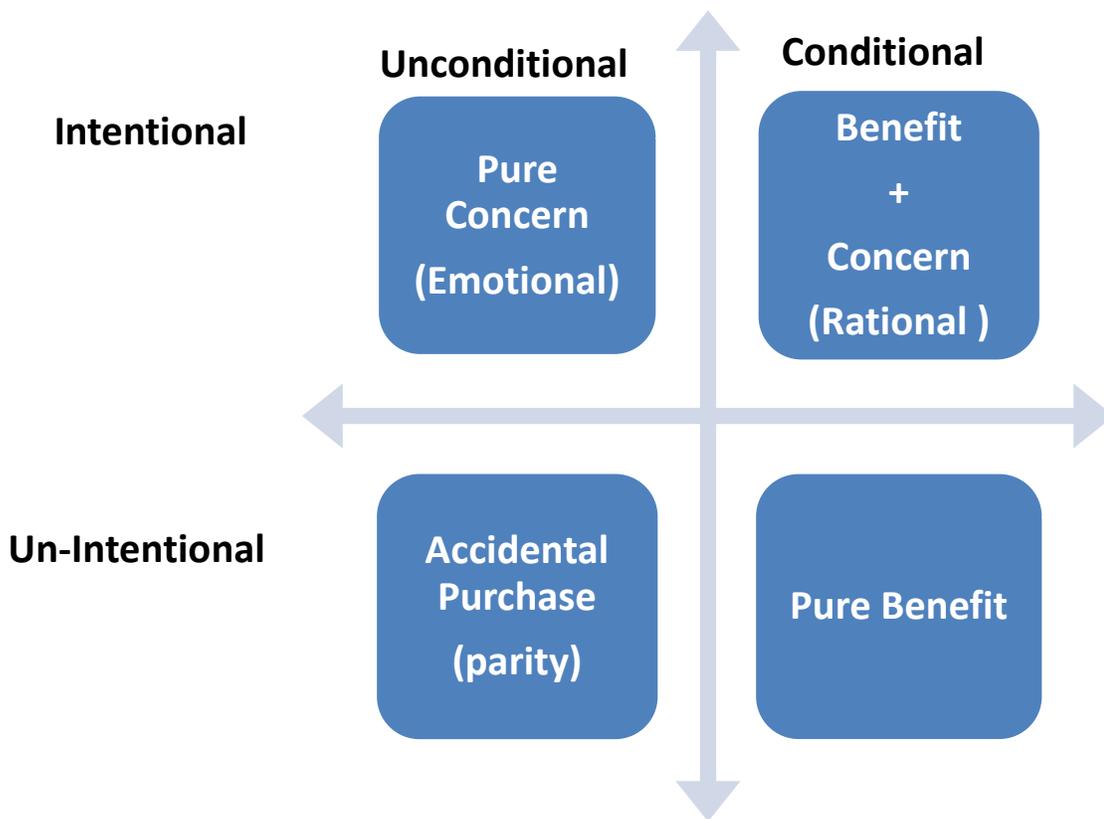


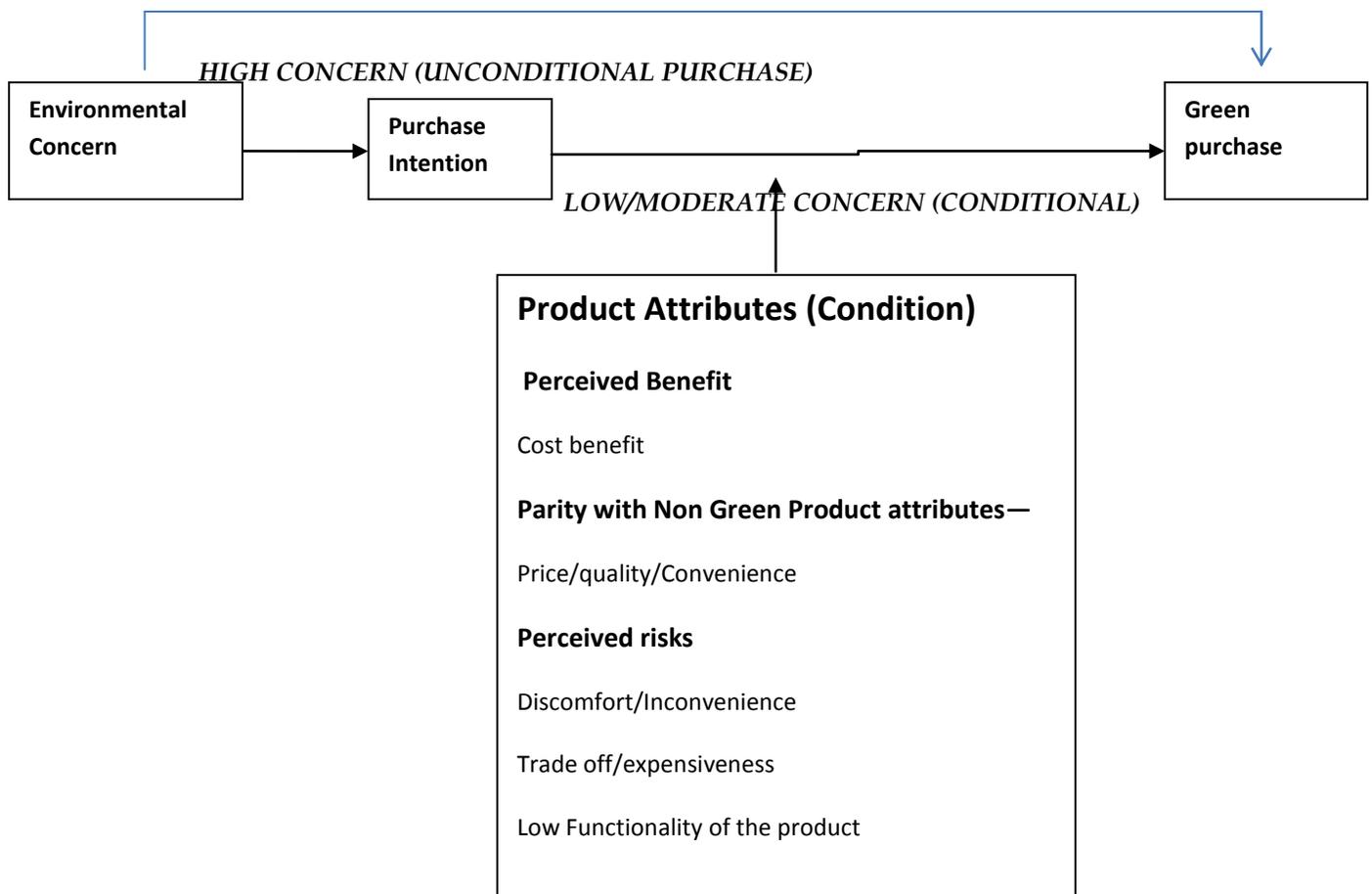
Fig. no.1 Consumer profile matrix (Proposed by author)

4.1.3 (First Profile) Rational Purchase (Benefit+ Concern) (Refer Model A)

This profile is of consumers who are concerned about the environment and may want to buy green products provided certain conditions specific to product attributes are fulfilled by green products. They may make Intentional but conditional purchase and are not willing to make any compromises. They may have high to moderate environmental knowledge, have positive attitude but make conditional purchase. So the moderating impact of specific product attribute is assumed to be significant. We term these purchases as Intentional, Conditional, Benefit plus Concern Rational purchase.

Model A- Profile 1 Intentional, Conditional benefits plus concern purchase

Profile 2 Intentional-Unconditional, Pure Environmental Concern Purchase.



Moderating variables (Model Proposed by author)(Intentional but conditional purchase)

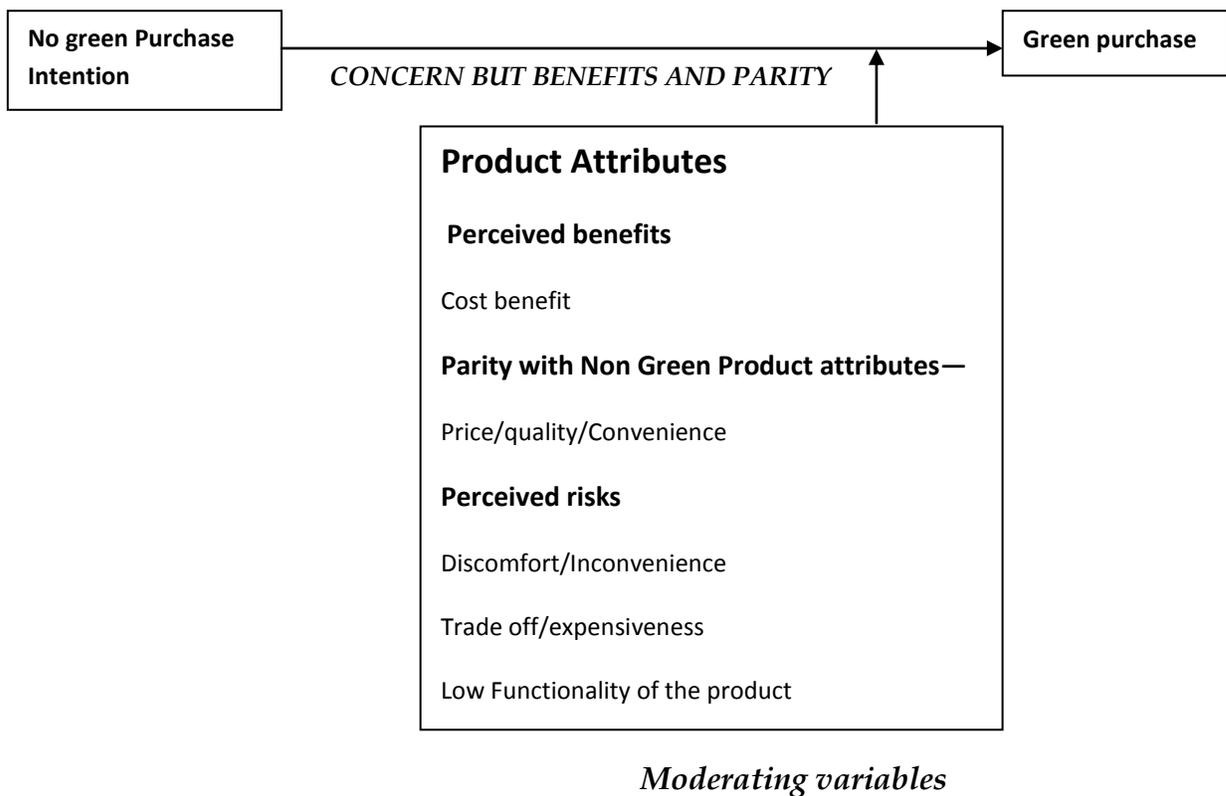
4.1.4 (Second profile) Pure Concern

The next profile posited is that of highly concerned consumers who make an intentional and unconditional purchase. The moderating influence of product attributes is assumed to be insignificant. Nothing deters them from buying green products. These consumers may be high on environmental knowledge, possess highly positive attitude, and may be convinced that their actions can make a difference. They are ready to compromise and face inconvenience associated with green products. We term these purchases as Intentional, Unconditional and Pure Concern Emotional Purchase.

Model B -Profile 3. Unintentional- Conditional Pure benefits purchase (No Concern)

- Profile 4. No Concern- Accidental -Purchase due to Parity with Non green products

-Profile 5. No Concern - Intentional Non Purchase – due to perceived risks



(Model proposed by author)(Unintentional green purchase)

4.1.5 (Third profile) Unintentional- Pure Benefit

Third profile is of consumers who are not concerned about the environment but are buying green products as there is certain cost benefit associated with it, like fuel or energy efficiency. This is purely benefit and conditional purchase made. Specific product attributes have significant influence on them. Moderate or low environmental

knowledge, negative attitude towards environment are some characteristics which may be identified with these types of consumers. We term these as Unintentional, Conditional and Pure benefit purchase.

4.1.6 (Fourth profile) Accidental Purchase- Parity of products

Fourth profile is that of consumers who are not aware about the environmental issues, have low environmental knowledge but still have made purchases as the green products were in Parity with Non green products. Moderating influence of Specific product parity has significant influence on purchase. These are Accidental, Unintentional and No concern Purchase.

4.1.7 (Fifth profile) -No purchase- This profile is of Consumers not concerned about the environment, are influenced negatively by risks associated with the products and so don't buy green.

5. CONCLUSION

The proposed model is to be investigated on actual purchase. By undertaking an analysis into actual purchase, different approaches that consumers take for green consumption and factors that are responsible for green purchases can be uncovered. The study would further give insights whether consumers only make rational purchases or does emotionality of environmental concern trigger green purchase. Does degree of concern temper compromise, tradeoff and unconditional purchase. Overall the importance of product attributes in green purchase decision will also be investigated. Environmental concern and its role as a moderating variable with various degrees of levels and its influence on Purchase Intention and ultimately actual purchase is an unexplored proposition of the proposed model. Further intervention of product attributes and its impact on type of purchase that is conditional or unconditional purchase is also unique.

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