

Jean-Mathieu Fallu
HEC Montreal

How actualizing a socially responsible consumption behaviour impacts attitude toward socially responsible consumption

Abstract

Research on socially responsible consumption (SRC) has generally adopted the classical information processing perspective where an attitude is seen as depending on individual beliefs. Thus, attitudes toward SRC behaviours are typically seen as being based on information directed to consumer beliefs. In the present research, a different approach is proposed where consumer attitudes follow from SRC behaviours. More precisely, the main objective of this research is to show, by means of both a laboratory experiment and a field experiment, that engaging in a SRC behavior will increase the strength of consumers' attitude toward SRC behaviors, will give predictability to their subsequent behaviors and will facilitate the adoption of a larger set of SRC behaviors across different consumption contexts. For this purpose, a comprehensive theoretical framework integrating the main theories that have looked at the influence of behaviour on attitude – namely, cognitive dissonance, self-perception, and biased scanning– is developed. Theoretical, managerial, and societal contributions of the research are discussed.

Keywords: Socially Responsible Consumption, Attitude, Cognitive Dissonance, Self-Perception, Biased Scanning

Introduction

Early definitions of socially responsible consumption (SRC) focused on the protection of the environment and, particularly, on recycling-related behaviours (Ellen, Wiener and Cobb-Walgren 1991; Kinnear, Taylor and Ahmed 1974; Webster 1975). More recent definitions encompass behaviours directed to corporations and brands. For example, some consumers reject brands known to be made in poor manufacturing conditions or by corporations that do not respect the environment (Auger et al. 2003; d'Astous and Legendre 2009), they favor local producers, locally-made products or smaller business and stores (François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence 2006). Several studies show that consumers have a favorable attitude toward

socially responsible consumption. However, a gap is generally observed between consumers' reported attitude and behaviours (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; De Pelsmacker et al. 2005). Indeed, in the SRC literature, two groups of consumers have been identified; consumers whose SRC behaviours are consistent with all their consumption activities, representing a minority, and those whose SRC behaviours are highly variable, depending on situations and contexts (Holland et al. 2002; Van Doorn et al., 2007). As argued by d'Astous and Legendre (2009), in many situations consumers are likely to invoke such cognitive justifications as economic development, government responsibility, and economic rationalization for not behaving in a socially responsible way (see also Eckardt, Devinney, and Belk 2006). For an attitude to be truly predictive of a socially responsible consumption behaviour, it needs to have a sufficient strength.

In marketing, research on SRC has generally adopted the classical information processing perspective (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen 1975; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) where attitude formation and attitude change about SRC behaviours depend on information directed to the beliefs of the individual (see: Barnett, Cafaro and Newholm 2005). A different stream of research has however shown with regularity that in the context of behaviour adoption, an attitude formed by means of a concrete engagement in the behaviour can be highly predictive of subsequent behaviours (e.g., Bem 1965; Festinger 1957; Kelman 1974). A central conclusion of research on SRC behaviours in parallel is that consumer perceived efficacy in relation with SRC behaviours may moderate the relationship between attitude and the actualization of SRC behaviours (Berger and Corbin 1992; Ellen et al. 1991). These observations suggest that, in terms of SRC, classical strategies aimed at changing customers' behaviours – i.e., those based mostly on attitudinal and persuasive grounds – are doomed to fail.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine a different approach where consumers are incited to engage in a SRC behaviour. It is proposed that this engagement will significantly reinforce the attitude toward SRC and, as a result, will reduce the variability and the context specificity of SRC behaviours. It is also proposed that the impact of the engagement in a SCR behaviour on attitude and subsequent behaviours will differ depending on the degree of external constraint imposed on the behaviour. Specifically, in this research the following research questions are put forward: (1) does engaging in a SRC behaviour heighten the strength of a positive attitude held toward SRC behaviours?, (2) does it insure its temporal consistency?, (3) does it reduce

consumers' propensity to justify their non-SRC behaviours?, and (4) does it have an effect on other, different, behaviours that are socially responsible? Another objective of this research consists in proposing an integration of the main theories that have looked at the influence of behaviour on attitude in a substantive conceptual framework. Finally, this research aims at contributing to knowledge development in the marketing and consumer behaviour disciplines and at developing sound managerial and societal recommendations.

Literature review: The influence of behaviour on attitude

The theories that have stimulated most research effort on the influence of behaviour on attitudes are cognitive dissonance theory, self-perception theory and the theory of biased scanning. These theories are briefly discussed.

Cognitive dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) lies on the principle of psychological and cognitive consistency. The theory predicts that a lack of correspondence between a realized behaviour and the individual's cognitions that pertain to this behaviour will lead to a certain degree of psychological discomfort. This discomfort is at the source of a motivation to reduce the felt dissonance. The discomfort reduction may take the form of a behaviour modification (making the behaviour consonant), an attitudinal modification (making the attitude consonant), or some dissonance avoidance (e.g., cognitive justification, willful ignorance). Stone and Cooper (2001) have proposed that cognitive dissonance depends mostly on the individual's cognitive structure (e.g., a standard acting as a reference point) activated by the cues present in the context of the behaviour. Two types of standard are likely to have an impact on the strength of the dissonance; a cultural standard which is prescriptive and has high normative value and a standard closely connected to the self whose value is highly idiosyncratic.

Self-perception

Self-perception theory (Bem 1967) proposes that individuals make inferences about their attitude from the observation of their behaviours, each new inference being, within a particular context, at the source of attitude formation or modification. For Bem (1967), attitudinal inferences are produced in the same way people infer other people's attitudes from the observation of their behaviours in interpersonal and social contexts. As Fazio, Zanna, and Cooper (1977) mention, attitudinal inferences based on behaviour are more specific for behaviours that are congruent with the held attitude, whereas cognitive dissonance should have more impact on attitude change

when the behaviour is incongruent. In addition, inferences made by the individual should be more determinant of the attitude when the pre-existing attitude is weak, poorly defined, inconsequential, or when cues in the environment signal that the actual behaviour reflects the attitude that should be held (Olson and Stone 2005)

Biased scanning

The theory of biased scanning proposes that individuals make a selective information search of their knowledge to justify behaviours they are aware of. That selective information search reinforces and, following cognitive elaboration, anchors the attitude toward the behaviour (Albarracín and Wyer 2000; Janis and King 1954). Kelman (1974) has shown that the behavioural effect on information search increases as the individual's motivation to produce the behaviour increases; motivational factors are internal to the individual (known validity of the behaviour, intrinsically latent motives), or are external to the individual (peer/group pressures, cultural and social norms, external incentives/rewards; Olson and Stone 2005). In essence, the individual playing a role persuades himself that the position he holds has a certain value, and this contribute to modify or reinforce the attitude (Janis and King 1954; Olson and Stone 2005).

The effect of behaviour on attitude strength

Zanna, Olson, and Fazio (1980) have shown that attitudes formed from behaviours are more predictive of future behaviours than attitudes formed from non-behavioural experiences, i.e., from external information directed at the individual's beliefs. Similarly, it has been shown that an information search based on behaviour is more crucial to attitude modification than the individual's beliefs about the consequences of the behaviour (Albarracín and Wyer 2000). For instance, in the context of SRC (i.e., a charitable donation to Greenpeace), Holland et al. (2002) have concluded on the basis of laboratory experiments that a strong attitude is predictive of behaviour, whereas a weak attitude is modified by the SRC behaviours. A strong attitude, because of the number and the strength of the associations (connections) with a particular object should be more accessible in memory in the presence of the attitudinal object or in a context that signals it (Fazio et al.1986). A strong attitude might also be at the source of an impact effect where the attitude is transferred to other objects pertaining to the same or to a related class of objects or conceptual categories (Olson and Stone 2005).

Proposed conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this research is presented in Figure 1. A central assumption of this conceptual framework is that consumers have a positive attitude toward SRC behaviours, but that the strength of their attitude varies highly from an individual to another. In the context of this research, consumers are placed in a situation where there is a request to engage in SRC behaviours from policy makers (e.g., a city, a government, or an organization). This request could take the form of a forced compliance (legislation, formal policy) or the form of some attempt based on incentives aimed at increasing the probability that the behaviour is performed.

Theoretical propositions

Research on cognitive dissonance suggests that the magnitude of the dissonance and the resulting motivation to reduce its phenomenology depend mostly on cues which, in the context of the behaviour, establish normative and/or idiosyncratic standards of reference. First, we propose that some policy incitation to engage in a SRC behaviour will position the behaviour in a context of behavioural prescription which, on the one hand, signals to the consumer that the SRC behaviour reflects the attitude to adopt and, on the other hand, signals a behavioural norm that is instrumental to the accentuation of the cognitive dissonance magnitude, in the absence of the behaviour. We suppose that cognitive dissonance will be resolved by a modification of the behaviour in congruence with the positive attitude held toward SRC behaviours or by avoidance, i.e., the use of cognitive justifications (d' Astous and Legendre 2009) or willful ignorance (Ehrich and Irwin 2005).

When the SRC behaviour is actualized, we propose that consumers will elaborate the associative network between the held attitude and the behaviour. Consequently, their attitude toward SRC behaviours will be reinforced, as proposed by the theory of biased scanning. Also, as attitude gains strength, it is expected that consumers' propensity to avoid cognitions producing psychological discomfort and to justify non-SRC behaviours will diminish. In the case of consumers showing a less well-defined attitude toward SRC behaviours, a sequence of inferential effects based on self-perception theory is proposed. Self-perception effects on attitude are expected to be heightened because the environment is signaling that the behaviour reflects the attitude that should be held. It is also proposed that engaging in a simple behaviour will lead consumers to make inferences about the efficacy of the SRC behaviours and as result, to serve the development of a personal standard for the behaviour. As a consequence, the establishment

of a personal standard will be at the source of an increased experience of cognitive dissonance in the absence of the behaviours.

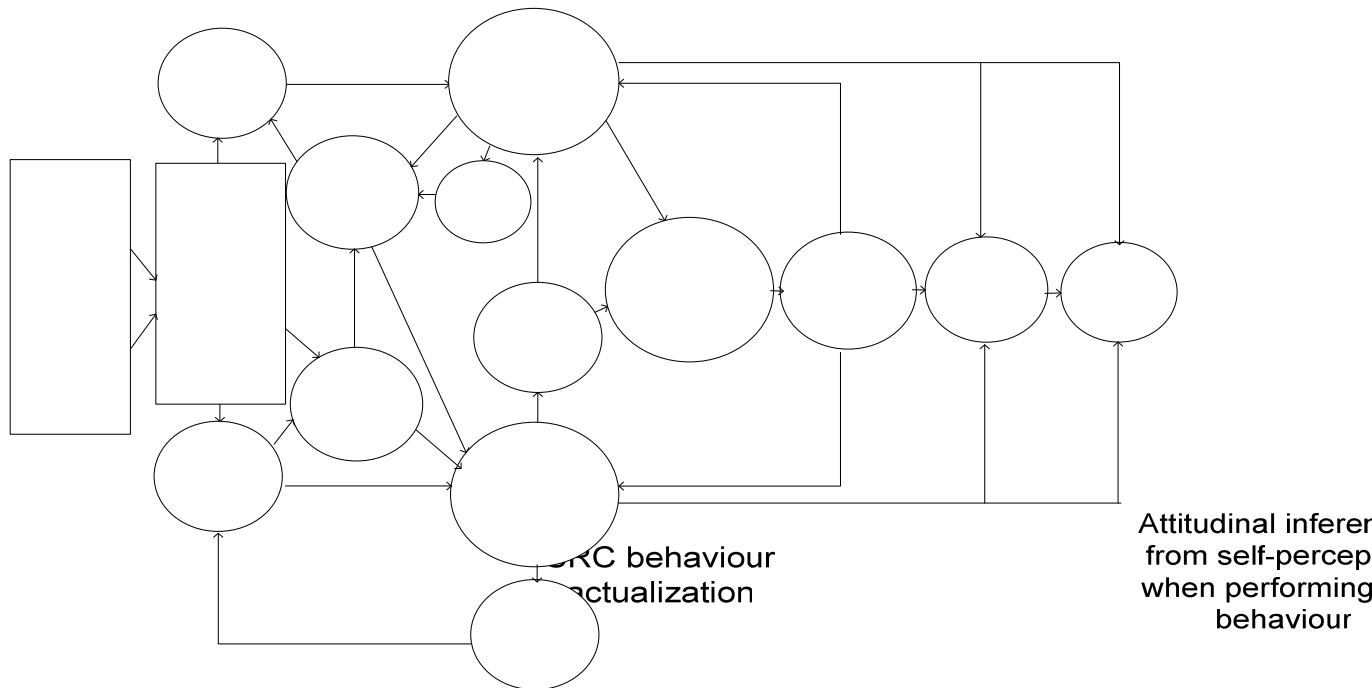


Figure 1. Proposed theoretical framework

Finally, we propose that the search of knowledge will follow from self-perception attitudinal inferences; selective search, in comparison with self-perception, is specific to the knowledge pertaining to the behaviour. At this stage, it is expected that knowledge elaboration from the behaviour will increase the attitude strength and its accessibility. Attitude should then be activated more easily and more quickly in contexts signalling socially responsible consumption. This, we propose, has three fundamental implications: 1) in the actualization of the SRC behaviour, attitudinal inferences will gain in precision, for an augmented set of SRC behaviours, 2) an heightened magnitude of cognitive dissonance when the behaviours is not performed, and, as consequence, an increased motivation to perform the behaviour (i.e., to not avoid or justify the behaviour) and finally, 3) an impact effect, meaning that the attitude toward SRC behaviours, being more accessible cognitively, will be more susceptible to be activated across different consumption contexts.

Impact of the mode of incitation to perform the SRC behaviour

The proposed effects have to be differentiated according to the type of request made for engaging in the SRC behaviour. Imposing some compliance to the SRC behaviour in comparison to facilitating its performance should lead the individual to attribute the psychological discomfort of dissonance to an external source (Linder, Cooper and Jones 1967), and to direct behavioural attitudinal inferences to the external source rather than to the attitude. As a result, forcing compliance is expected to facilitate the justification of non-SRC behaviour (i.e., the avoidance of dissonance), to impair the customer perceived efficacy for the behaviour, as well as the development of a personal standard for the behaviour, and to significantly reduce the elaboration of the attitude and its strength.

Proposed method

One laboratory experiment and one field experiment will be conducted to test the proposed conceptual framework. The laboratory experiment is a 2 (participants initial attitude, weak/strong), × 2 (actualization of a SRC behaviour, yes/no), × 2 (type of request made for the behaviour, voluntary/imposed) completely randomized factorial design. This experiment will unfold in two phases. In phase 1, a questionnaire will be sent to a large sample of the adult population. This questionnaire will incorporate, notably, a shortened version of a scale measuring consumers' justifications for not engaging in SRC behaviours (d'Astous and Legendre 2009), a scale measuring the extent to which consumers concretely engage in SRC behaviours (François-Lecompte and Valette-Florence 2005), a modified version of the consumer perceived effectiveness scale in the context of SRC (Berger and Corbin 1992), a general measure of cognitive dissonance (e.g., Elliot and Devine 1994), and a measure of attitude polarity and strength toward socially responsible consumption behaviours (e.g., Ehrich and Irwin 2005). The instrument will also serve for participant solicitation and to identify participants' initial attitude strength for the second phase of the laboratory study. In phase 2, participants will have to engage in a concrete SRC behaviour. Afterwards, participants will answer the same questionnaire they have filled in phase 1 of the experiment.

The field experiment will be conducted in one urban district where a composting program was implemented (voluntary SRC behaviour), and another one where it has not. Following the proposed theoretical framework, we expect that consumers having engaged in the composting program will be more open to engage in different SRC behaviours because of a heightened

attitude toward SRC behaviours. The measurement instruments to be used are expected to be highly similar to those used in the laboratory experiment. The use of both a laboratory and a field experiments is intended to increase the value of the research from the point of view of both internal and external validity.

Expected theoretical, managerial and societal contributions

This research aims at contributing to the development of the literature on socially responsible consumption as well as to the marketing literature pertaining to consumer attitude formation and behaviour adoption and modification. A major theoretical expected contribution of the research is the comprehensive integration we make of the three most developed and used theories in the study of the influence of behaviour on attitude. This integration, in our knowledge, has not been done previously and particularly, has not been considered in marketing and in the context of SRC consumer behaviour adoption. The use of experimentation to study socially responsible consumption represents also a contribution, at the methodological level. To our knowledge, few studies in marketing have used the experimental method for that purpose and no study has used simultaneously controlled and field experiments.

At the firm, society and strategic levels, the proposed theoretical framework has important implications for the formulation and the implementation of public and organizational policies. Increasing socially responsible consumption behaviours, a fundamental component of the sustainable development movement, is an essential objective for our societies. The study will show, and demonstrate by means of the experimental method, that promotional efforts are still needed to insure notoriety and sufficient comprehension of socially responsible consumption issues, but that, at the level of attitude modification and adoption of concrete behaviours, efforts should be directed toward sustaining optimally SRC behaviours by non-coercive means.

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