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A possible stimulus of the consumers–citizens' sustainable consumption¹

Abstract

Sustainable development is a process aimed at achieving the objectives of environmental improvement, economic, social and institutional setting, both locally and globally. Given that a shift toward more sustainable consumption patterns is, nowadays, required. The paper aims to empirically verify if the regulatory focus of the individuals can be useful in order to encourage the sustainable consumption. An experimental research has been made in which regulatory focus was manipulated in order to ascertain the role of the regulatory focus itself in a green product purchasing decision. The aim is to understand how it is possible persuade consumers to reward the most active companies in environmental sustainability, choosing their offerings.

Key Words

Sustainable consumption, regulatory focus, consumers-citizens, green product, sustainability, green marketing.

1. Introduction

The widely accepted definition of sustainable development is contained in the Brundtland report, prepared in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development and

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that takes the name of the then Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who chaired the committee: "Sustainable development, far from being a final state of harmony, is rather the process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional change are made consistent with future needs as well as with the existing ones". Sustainability is related, therefore, to the consumption of goods and services that meet basic necessities and quality of life without endangering the needs of future generations (OECD, 2002). This may be interpreted in a number of ways, but principally sustainability is about limiting the throughput of resources, while making the best use of those resources available (Cooper, 2005). Sustainable development is, therefore, a process aimed at achieving the objectives of environmental improvement, economic, social and institutional setting, both locally and globally. This process binds, therefore, in a relationship of interdependence, the protection and enhancement of natural resources to economic, social and institutional dimensions, in order to meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In this sense, the sustainability of development is incompatible with the degradation of the heritage and natural resources (which in fact are finite), but also the violation of human dignity and freedom, with poverty and economic decline, with the lack of recognition of rights and equal opportunities.

For these reasons, the sustainability revolves around four core components (UNCED 1992): economic sustainability, that is the ability to generate income and employment for the livelihood of the population; social sustainability, namely the capacity to ensure conditions of human well-being (safety, health, education) evenly distributed by class and gender; environmental sustainability, that is the ability to maintain quality and reproducibility of natural resources; institutional sustainability, meaning the ability to ensure stability, democracy, participation and justice.

The interest shown in sustainable issues is continuously growing (Bandura, 2007; Fitzsimmons, 2008). Sustainable consumption is now a mainstream topic and has been at the top of the international public administration agenda ever since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED 1992; Valor 2008), 20 years ago. In the actual scenario the sustainability can be found in a radical change or, at least, in a rethinking of the present socioeconomic growth models. The actual lifestyles have to be

modified if we really want to try to limit the effects of the irresponsible management of the territory and the environment on the next generations. |

Both at the local and global governance level (European Commission 2005, 2007; European Communities 2007), consumers have been given a relevant role and responsibility in the pursuit of sustainable development (Schaefer and Crane 2005; Haunstrup Christensen et al. 2007; Autio et al. 2009; Peattie and Collins 2009; Thøgersen and Crompton 2009; Moisander et al. 2010; Berg 2011). The consumer–citizen role implies a simultaneous presence of duties and rights (Hansen and Schrader 1997). As citizens have the right to choose, they also have the duty to confront the consequences of their choices (Gabriel and Lang 2006). Hence, to be a citizen may lead to different social, environmental, and ethical choices than to be an individual serving one's own immediate interest. Consequently, consumers have responsibilities for the effects of their choices (Hansen and Schrader 1997). |

The first economic and then financial crisis of recent years has facilitated the development of sustainable behavior by individuals which are now more aware, more critical and more parsimonious. It is unclear whether the more responsible behavior is the result of economic or ideological reasons. What is certain is that although the waste differentiated collection, the rediscovery of "poor" recipes that do not waste leftovers, the turn off of the lights are desirable behaviors in a civilized society, they are not indicative of a different orientation in the purchase processes of the subjects. So, for example, it is possible that in many lights are turned off to save on electricity bills, but how many individuals are willing to change the bulb to replace their halogen light bulbs?

In other words, the greater "sobriety" which is observed in recent years can be the result of an ideological choice, that is to say of a dissatisfaction to all that is unnecessarily expensive, or a kind of fatigue against excess and the superfluous, or be the result of an economic choice: that is, the crisis may have led to greater caution, spending restraint, but not necessarily a shift towards environmentally friendly products.

That said, what should we do to cause the consumer to buy more sustainable, ethical and eco-friendly products? What to communicate, to persuade them to reward the most active companies in environmental sustainability, choosing their offerings?

2. Literature review

2.1 The communication strategies for the promotion of environmental sustainable products

The initial optimism and enthusiasm about the possibility to influence sustainable consumption (Fuchs and Lorek 2005), has left space to the actual modest progress made in changing people's consumption patterns (Thøgersen and Crompton 2009). Only rather marginal modifications in people's lifestyles seem to be induced (Thøgersen 2005; Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Haunstrup Christensen et al. 2007; Berg 2011). Some authors have focused their attention on the possibility to influence the sustainable consumption (Kronrod 2012; Osterhus 1997; Pieters et al 1998) and sustainable marketing, related is one of the answers to the problem (Fuller D. A., 1999).

Sustainability Marketing is “an evolution of marketing that blends the mainstream economic and technical perspectives with the emerging concepts of relationship marketing and the social, ethical, environmental and intergenerational perspectives of the sustainable development agenda” (Belz and Peattie, 2009). It implies a sustainability-oriented vision of marketing. It integrates sustainability principles into both marketing theory and the practical decision making of marketing managers. Thus it aims to accomplish the enhancement of products' social and environmental performance and customer satisfaction at the same time (Belz and Peattie, 2009).

At a more practical level, sustainable marketing is a “process of planning, implementing and controlling the development, pricing, promotion and product distribution that satisfy customer needs, organizational goals and assure ecosystem compatibility” (Fuller and Gillett, 1999). In particular, huge advertising investments are in industries that represent a big portion of the individual ecological footprint, such as food, transport, energy. Firms that promote products or services in these industries may use messages that can inspire and orient positive behavior modifications (Hartmann et al., 2005).

Following the consolidated cognitive approach and focusing the attention on how consumers acquire information, process them in order to give them meaning, and then how to use them to direct their behaviors toward achieving goals, it is possible to understand what type of

communication may be more suitable in order to change attitudes, and buying intentions toward environmentally friendly and sustainable products. Since the attitude is a motivational state, a psychological tendency expressed by evaluating a particular entity with a certain degree of favor/disfavor (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), we must start from the analysis of the more recent contributions in terms of motivation. Hence, this article aims to empirically verify if the regulatory focus can be used in order to stimulate the sustainable consumption.

2.2 The regulatory focus

The regulatory focus represents, essentially, the way in which people approach pleasure and avoid pain. The regulatory focus of a person concentrates on the desired end-state, and on the approach motivation used to move from the actual state to the desired end-state. It regulates the influences that a person would be exposed to in the decision-making process, and determine the different ways an individual achieves his goals. The Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 2000, 2002) contemplates two separate and independent self-regulatory orientations for meeting the primary human needs of nurturance and security prevention and promotion (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1998). These foci, promotion and prevention, achieve the fulfillment of these basic needs by guiding the pursuit of goals using different behavioral means characterized by different emotional experiences and evaluations.

A prevention focus is oriented to safety, responsibilities, and security needs by following the guidelines and the rules. Goals are perceived as oughts and there is a strategic concern with approaching non-losses (the absence of negatives) and avoiding losses (the presence of negatives). Individuals who adopt a prevention focus regulate their behaviors avoid errors of commission and prefer to use vigilance strategies and ensure their stability. They are directed at meeting duties and obligations. As such, it results in sensitivity to negative outcome and relative pain from losses.

On the other hand, a promotion focus, emphasizes hopes, accomplishments, and advancement needs. This focus is more concerned with higher level gains such as improvement and realization. Goals are viewed as ideals, and there is a strategic concern with approaching gains (the presence of positives) and avoiding non-gains (the absence of positives). Individuals with a promotion focus regulate their behaviors to attain progress, growth, and success. Hence,

they form the goal to pursue dreams and aspirations, striving to maximize future gains. These individuals are inclined against committing errors of omission (Crowe & Higgins, 1997) and are associated with eagerness strategies (Hong & Lee, 2008) and openness to change (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999). As such, it results in sensitivity to positive outcomes and to relative pleasure from gains, in general to the presence and absence of positive outcomes (i.e., gains and no gains).

Indeed, the independent goal of distinguishing oneself from others through personal achievement and growth is consistent with a promotion focus, and the interdependent goal of connecting oneself with others through fulfilling obligations and responsibilities is consistent with a prevention focus.

Moreover Regulatory Focus Theory proposes that there are different preferred goal-pursuit strategies for each system. In other words, different strategic means fit a prevention focus versus a promotion focus (Cesario et al., 2004; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, Idson, et al., 2003; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). Eager means are concerned with ensuring matches to the desired end state, whereas vigilant means are concerned with ensuring against mismatches to the desired end state.

A vigilant strategy ensures the absence of negatives (non-losses) and ensures against the presence of negatives (losses). A prevention focus and a vigilant strategy both operate in terms of non-losses and losses, and are especially sensitive to the difference between “0” and “-1” (maintenance). Vigilant means are means that ensure the absence of negative outcomes (be careful) and ensure against the presence of negative outcomes (avoid mistakes).

When an actor in a promotion focus pursues goals, he will prefer to use eager strategic means of goal attainment, whereas an actor in a prevention focus will prefer to use vigilant strategic means. An eager strategy ensures the presence of positive outcomes (gains, look for means of advancement) and ensure against the absence of positive outcomes (non-gains, do not close off possible advancements). A promotion focus and an eager strategy both operate in terms of gains and non-gains, and are especially sensitive to the difference between “0” and “+1” (attainment).

When individuals adopt a promotion rather than prevention focus, some drawbacks can ensue. Individuals can become more sensitive to distractions (e.g., Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002). They are also less inclined to change their behavior in response to criticism (Forster,

Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001). In contrast, a promotion focus, which can be activated merely by reflecting upon future hopes and aspirations for example, can afford many benefits. A promotion focus tends to improve the capacity of individuals to negotiate effectively, for example (Galinsky, Leonardelli, Okhuysen, & Mussweiler, 2005). They also solve problems more creatively (Friedman & Forster, 2001).

Regarding the buying process, different authors investigated how regulatory focus influences the search for information on alternatives and the formation of consideration sets (Pham and Chang, 2010), the role that different types of motivation have on how to process information (Agrawal and Maheswaran 2005; Jain 2003, Jain and Maheswaran 2000), evaluation (Aaker, Lee, 2001) and the choice between different alternatives (Kirmani and Zhu, 2007).

Moreover, as it has been demonstrated (Cesaro, Grant and Higgins, 2004; Evans and Petty, 2003, Pham and Avenet, 2004), the regulatory focus also impacts on the effectiveness of advertising campaigns. Research has shown that campaigns that emphasize the meanings that are compatible with the regulatory focus of recipients are more effective (Higgins 2000, Higgins et al. 2003). It is however not yet clear whether this principle applies in different contexts. First, it is not clear whether the principle of "regulatory fit" is valid in all modes of message processing. The main research on the effectiveness of the congruence have dealt with products of high personal relevance, such as health (Uskul et al 2007) or have taken place in controlled experimental environment that are conducive to the systematic process of the message (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). There are now experiments involving low-value products and high value personal development, conducted from the perspective of regulatory focus.

Both nurturance and security are necessary for survival, each focus is present in all people to some degree. Thus, someone who is chronically prevention-focused generally prefers a vigilant strategy, and someone who is chronically promotion-focused generally prefers an eager strategy (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Chronic regulatory focus is measured using the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Higgins et al., 2001) or the Regulatory Focus Strength measure. Momentary regulatory focus can be primed or induced.

But an individual's regulatory orientation is not necessarily fixed. Regulatory focus can differ both across individuals (chronic regulatory focus) and across situations (momentary regulatory focus). Basically, while individuals have chronic tendencies towards either promotion or prevention, these preferences may not hold for all situations. Furthermore, a

specific regulatory focus can be induced. In other words, there are chronic individual differences in the predominance of each, and, in addition, situational features are capable of momentarily activating one or the other.

3. The research hypothesis

The paper, therefore, will empirically determine whether regulatory focus can motivate consumers to engage in sustainable consumption choices.

In particular we can assume that prevention type consumers feel a moral duty towards a more sustainable lifestyle in respect to the society in which we live. Considering the practical way (local focus) in which they process information, they live this obligation immediately and are therefore willing to change their lifestyle readily. The already mentioned concept of consumer-citizen (Hansen and Schrader 1997) - which implies that consumers have not only the ability to choose different options of consumption, but also a moral obligation to confront the consequences of their choices – should be therefore emphasized by a prevention approach.

More precisely, we want to investigate the following *research hypothesis*. *HPI*: “Individuals in a state of prevention, are more likely to adopt sustainable behaviors.” The rationale is that, in fact they are more anchored to their responsibilities, obligations and duties.

On the other hand, promotion type individuals are more focused on the aspirations and dreams and, therefore, they adopt a more abstract approach to information processing. As a consequence they do not feel so strong the pressure of having to quickly adjust their behavior in order to adopt a more sustainable purchasing process.

Therefore the second hypothesis is the following. *HP2*: “Individuals who adopt a promotion perspective are less likely to adopt sustainable behaviors.” The rationale is that these people are less stressed by their responsibilities and prioritize self-interest over group welfare.

4. The experiment

4.1 The methodology

The study is a one factor (regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion) between subject design and employed 41 participants (27 female, age= 24.27 , SD=1.42) of an international business school that participated in return of course credits.

The experiment aims first at testing H1 and consequently H2. That is to say that prevention focused individuals show higher compliance with the sustainable behavior and promotion focused individuals show lower compliance. A variety of experimental protocols have been developed in order to manipulate regulatory focus, at least transiently (Florack and Scarabis, 2006). In essence, to activate a promotion or prevention focus, researchers can increase the salience of gains or losses. Alternatively, researchers can emphasize needs that relate to nurturance and achievement or safety and protection. Finally, researchers can prime either aspirations or duties. In order to manipulate the regulatory focus, we employed the procedure designed by Pham et al (2010), in which participants read a scenario based on the situation of choosing a restaurant to celebrate a job offer. Participants, randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, after reading the scenario, answered to two manipulation check questions, as in Pham et al 2010, in which they had to rate whether in the situation they “would pick a dish that would delight them” (1= promotion) or “would pick a dish that would not disappoint them” (7= prevention). As expected, preferences were more skewed toward the promotion options in the promotion focused condition ($M=1.25$, $SD=.55$); $F(1,40)= 5.55$ $p<.05$) than in the prevention focused condition ($M=2.21$ $SD=1.25$).

Afterwards, participants in both conditions were presented with the news that in their city the government has launched the car sharing service. The short paragraph reporting the news illustrated how important this service is for the environment and highlighted its contribute in reducing pollution.

Right after, participants answered to the four items measuring “compliance with the behavior” as in Kronrod et al (2012). The scale was a 7 points consisting of 4 items (“How plausible is

that you will adopt the behavior/How certain is it/how sure are you/what are the chances that you will adopt the car sharing).

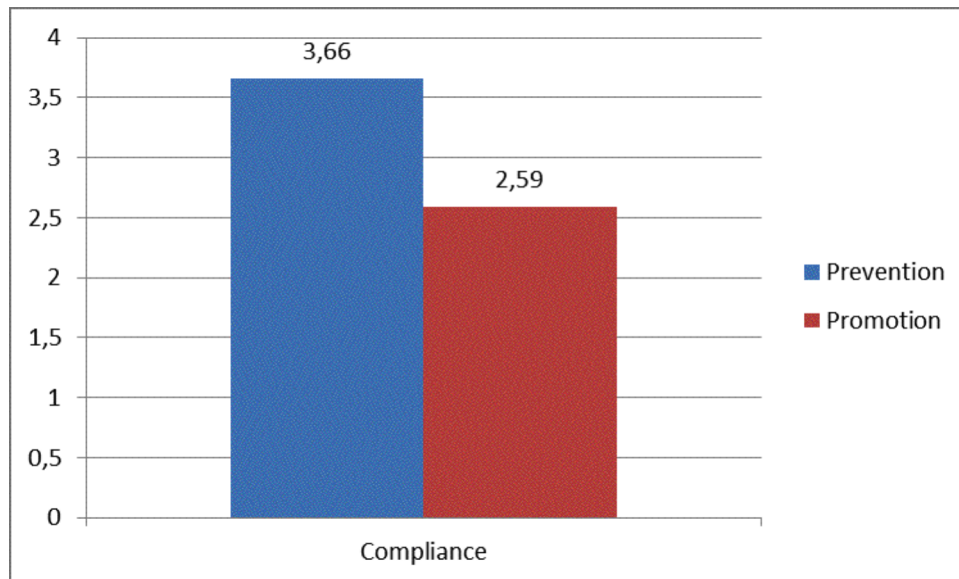
4.2 The results

We proposed that, following Regulatory Focus Theory (Higgins, 1997), the extent to which individuals are promotion or prevention-focused would be differentially associated with the intention to implement a sustainable consumption. Reliability for the compliance measure was $\alpha = .951$, therefore, as in Kronrod et al (2012), we averaged the four items forming one index measuring compliance with the sustainable behavior.

A one way ANOVA of regulatory focus on compliance with the sustainable behavior yielded the expected results (fig.1). Participants who read the prevention focus scenario showed higher compliance value ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 1.63$) than those who were in the promotion focus condition ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.4$) $F(1,40) = 5.08$ $P < .05$.

In accordance with our hypothesis, we find that the prevention focus induced consumers to comply more with the suggested sustainable behavior. As expected, promotion focused individuals tend not to perceive the suggested sustainable behavior as urgent and as their responsibility, therefore they show less compliance with the behavior.

Figure 1: The results



5. Managerial implications

The marketing system needs to change to be more sustainable (Peattie, 2007). The sustainable life marketing (UNEP, 2005) seeks to recognize that current consumption patterns are unsustainable. The aim that responsible companies will help change society implies an overall belief that modification is difficult not only to start, but also to sustain.

Generally individuals feel an obligation to act in a sustainable way (Kaiser 2006), as evidenced by their household source-separating waste (Thøgersen 1996), home preserving energy policies (Abrahamse and Steg 2009), or eco-labeled products buying (Grankvist and Biel 2001). Nether the less, two central issues related to behavioral change are the gap between consumers' professed desire to change and their actual behavior (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; McEachern et al., 2007), and the need to interrupt habitual actions (Jackson, 2005).

However, in order to promote or facilitate such feelings of obligation more effectively, marketers need more knowledge about possible contingencies for developing them. Hence, the belief is that the present study provided further insights about sustainable behavior approach and useful implications on how to promote sustainable consumption.

Therefore, researchers and practitioners can use Regulatory Focus Theory in order to increase the effectiveness of their attempts to change attitudes and behavior. This psychological theory, for example, like many others in the past, has been applied in marketing communication, specifically in the subfields of nonverbal communication and persuasion. As companies interested in advancing sustainable lifestyles must bring such environmental impacts into consumers' everyday discursive consciousness (Jackson, 2005) through communication, the findings of this study can be applied to the companies' marketing communication in order to have a greater impact on consumer's sustainable behavior. In fact, marketing communication could be effectively used in order to change attitudes, and buying intentions toward environmentally friendly and sustainable products. In particular companies should induce a prevention state, through marketing communication, as this is preferable when individuals are asked to choose a sustainable product or behavior.

6. Limitations and future research lines

The study here presented, through an experimental methodology, shows a first attempt on how to foster a more sustainable behavior. Indeed the experiment carried out might suffer from some limitations: as common practice in experimental studies, students are employed to test the relations among variables. This might impact the generalizability of the results given that actual consumers might show different patterns of behaviors. In addition, only one sustainable setting, namely the car sharing service, was tested. Investigating different product/service settings might increase the external validity of the results, allowing for more generalizable conclusions. Future researches could be oriented towards the validity of the relation between induced regulatory focus and sustainable consumption in all modes of message processing (heuristic and systematic), as the Heuristic Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1980) postulates that the same elements of a message, through processes of different processing, can lead to different persuasive effects. Finally, we advise that, in order to recognize what stimulates and inhibits consumers–citizens sustainable consumption, more research is required on people's perceptions of civic duties, how individuals balance these duties with self-interests, and the hesitations, uncertainties, and conflicts that consumers–citizens perceive (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Moreover, more research would

be valuable to advance understanding of green behaviors and its consequences on environment, economy, and society.

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