

IMPACT OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATION ON GREEN PURCHASE

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ABSTRACT

Indian consumers are lured by newer products with attractive features. Increase in disposable incomes and the urge to change lifestyle have fuelled this momentum. Increasing demand for technologically advanced products and services is increasing the chances of “over purchase”. This tendency may subsequently lead to over-use and even wastage of limited resources. India is already facing threats pertaining to several ecological issues like enhanced carbon emission, pollution, emission of greenhouse gases, climate change, etc. Such a situation requires some action in the form of creating awareness and guiding consumers towards “green” consumptions. Concern for sustainability is required to be translated into action. Along with advertisements, efforts should be made to reinforce messages through different media at various junctures. Even society needs to recognise the persons engaged in green consumption. Through this paper, we have discussed issues like sustainable development and consumerism. Our endeavour is to bring into light the role played by education and communication through different channels at various points in cultivating a culture which is conducive for greener society. We have also stressed upon the need to highlight and promote the contribution of those consumers who have already exhibited green behaviour.

Keywords: Green Consumerism, Education, Communication, Sustainable Development.

INTRODUCTION:

India is one of the most promising nations with a powerful middle class market and an economy that is expected to grow. Its middle class consumer base is a key factor to its growth story. The result of this growth is evident in the form of improved lifestyle and increased spending capacity. A large Indian consumer base comprising a massive, evolving middle class offers a wide range of opportunities for marketers. The household income is set to become threefold in the next two decades with the possibility of India becoming the fifth largest consumer economy by 2025. Consumer spending is likely to become four-fold from 17 billion INR to 70 Billion INR. Urban population is expected to rise from 318 million to 523 million by 2025 (MGI, 2007). All this may attract companies to introduce newer products to take advantage of the prevailing opportunity. The share of youth in Indian demography is very large at around 60 %. Youth are the most vulnerable target for companies and likely victims of consumerism. The youth longing for better standard of living and comfort are likely to overlook the issue of environmental degradation. Their pursuit of consumerism may lead to wastage. Further, this aspiring consumer is likely to become a factor driving shortage in the commodities which are categorised as vital (Czinkota & Scuba, 2009).

“When man has satisfied his physical needs their psychological desires take over” (Galbraith 1984, p.119) as the society judges him according to his possessions. This provides impetus to a way of leading a life full of materialism and affluence where consuming more will have a symbolic meaning that not only reflects the identity of the person but orients him towards over-consumption. On one hand, consumerism is on the rise while on the other hand, sustainability as an issue has attracted its due attention from companies, government, NGO’s, academicians, and society at large. Therefore, there is a great need to ensure that consumerism is channelized into sustainable and greener experience. This is possible through responsible purchase behaviour. Through this paper, we have emphasised upon the role of education and communication in building a culture for green society.

CONSUMERISM:

Consumerism has been defined as the "social movement seeking to augment the rights and power of buyers in relation to sellers," (Kotler, 1972). Borgmann (2000, p.420) states that “consumerism attenuates human engagement with material reality”. It is associated with shopping and possessions (Tucker, 2002) and many a times, it is a threat for environment as it may bring pollution, overuse, wastage, etc. with it. McGregor (2003, p.11) reiterates this by stating that “consumerism is more of a threat under postmodernism than modernism because it has become a process of self-identification, a process that has to be continually fed by buying more things to define who we are. We now use the products and services to define ourselves—it is all about images and illusions; our reality is recreated on a daily basis by buying things.” Kasser (2002, p.22) has pointed out that those “who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant”

SUSTAINABILITY:

The rise of green movement is because of rising concerns about consumption patterns leading to over utilization of limited resources and environmental degradation (Grimmer & Wooley, 2014). The threat of materialism and over-consumption evokes the thought of sustainability to counter the ill effects of consumerism. The definition of sustainability makes this clear. Sustainability may be defined as "the need to ensure a better quality of life for all, now and into the future, in a just and equitable manner, whilst living within the limits of supporting ecosystems" (Agyeman, Bullard, & Evans, 2002, p.78). Another perspective towards sustainability emphasises the requirement "to meet the basic needs of all" and “extend to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life.” It seeks to moderate the use of natural

resources and renew the earth's depleting finite natural resources (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p.8).

The issue of environmental degradation and the need for ecological preservation are gaining momentum. We often come across terms like climate change, global warming, green house emission, pollution, scarcity of resources etc. The reason for all these problems is the overuse of non-renewable resources and bad consumption habits. To ensure sustainable consumption the companies are doing a rethink on their offerings. They have started coming up with better products which are less detrimental to the environment and may be termed as green products. However, marketing them requires special efforts (Chan, 1999).

Some consumers have also identified with the issue of sustainability and reflected this by changing their consumption behaviour. Studies show that some consumers have started looking for products which are green substitutes (Laroche et al., 2001). This has resulted in an increasing number of green consumers. Companies are incorporating green element in their marketing operations including designing, packaging and promotion (Polonsky et al., 1997). Several products with green attributes like recycle, refillable, reusable, etc. are penetrating the market (Banerjee et al., 1995). Many consumers are also reported to be found willing to pay more for green products (Coddington, 1993). However, Indian consumers are price sensitive by nature and look for good bargains. They are likely to focus more on immediate saving than long term benefits. Major (1993) has also pointed out that consumers may not recognise environmental issues as a problem and show lesser concern towards it. Contradicting Major (1993), Kalafatis et al. (1999) state that consumers across different markets have accepted that environmentalism is a problem that needs to be addressed. Chan (2001) also points out that the involvement towards poor environmental conditions is increasing and many people have reported their concern towards this area in the last few years (Diekmann & Franzen, 1999). However, the intricacies pertaining to green purchase intentions of consumers can hardly be generalized due to differences among societies and culture (Peattie, 2001).

Despite differences among societies and nations no one can deny the common concern for sustainable environment. The main issue is how to make a common man conscious of this issue on a day- to-day basis. Hartmann & Ibanez (2006) have pointed out that one of the key challenges which marketers of eco-friendly products have to face is how to make the consumer understand that consumption of green products will result in their own personal benefits. Pickett-Baker & Ozaki (2008) also reiterate the need to relate self-interest with green consumption.

It is quite likely that social consciousness may help in persuading consumer towards green products (Polonsky, 2011). Studies have emphasized upon the need to provide information about sustainability. For instance, Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stresses the need to communicate information about fallacies of materialism. "Increased efforts at consumer education may be able to correct this and lead to changes in consumer behaviour" (Abela 2000, p.9). The important role played by the peer group, family, friends and society in making purchase decisions cannot be ignored as the consumers value the perceptions and attitudes of their reference group (Deffuant, et al., 2005). Ewing (2001) also points out the role played by social norms in green behaviour. The effect of co-workers, neighbour and peers on purchase of a green product has been reported by other studies as well (UNEP and UNESCO, 2001). Other important factors involved in green purchase include attitude towards the green products, various contextual factors like disposable income, price of the product, functional benefit, etc. (Ramayah, Lee, & Mohamad, 2010).

Building a culture in society where education 'for sustainability' is available rather than 'about sustainability' is likely to have a greater impact (Coriddi, 2008, p.1). There is a need for emphasis upon cultural sustainability which can bring about consumption changes in a manner which respects the cultural values and includes discussions pertaining to sustainability. This involves exploration of methods to balance cultural complexities, consumption and sustainability and bring about cultural change in favour of sustainability (Young 2008). Taking this idea further, we contend that educating society at a deeper level is the first such step towards building this consciousness about green consumption.

ROLE OF COMMUNICATION FOR GREEN EXPERIENCE:

Dewey (1938) postulates experience as the collection of various interactions that the consumer have with their peers and environment which is shaped by complex emotions occurring simultaneously. We could extend this definition to green experience as well. Accordingly, we define green experience as the accumulation of myriad emotions such as pleasure, sense of responsibility, feeling of pride and altruism, concern for posterity, respect for ecological co-existence that are felt during interaction with peers and environment. “The best way to educate people about sustainable development is to help them discover what the term encompasses, what it means, and how it should affect the ways they live their lives ... By helping people to understand and engage with the concept... they will discover sustainable development for themselves and begin to apply it within their world, thus establishing a basis on which to describe it in their own word.” (Quadrangle Research as cited by HEPS, 2004, p.10). Education for sustainability is needed to build an environment where individuals, companies, and other stakeholders align themselves in the direction of fostering development along with sustainability. A systematic change in the psyche of the consumers is required which helps them to lead their desired lifestyle along with maintaining environmental norms. The education for sustainability may bring about more awareness and result in suggestions for better solutions (UNECE 2005, 1; UNECE, 2009, 15). Keeping the extensive literature in mind we propose a theoretical model (see Figure 1) that emphasizes upon the role of communication in building the culture for a green society and green experience. The proposed model takes into consideration various stakeholders such as family, educational institutes, workplace, business and non-business organizations and government who need to learn, develop and communicate a culture that promotes sustainability and green experience amidst consumerism.

Business organizations play a very important role in promoting consumerism, hence their responsibility for communicating sustainable consumption habits are the greatest. Belz & Peattie (2009, p.180) also feel that “sustainable marketing communications is the next step in the evolution of marketing communications”. At various stages and touch points of contact with customers the importance of sustainability may be reinforced by the marketers. To achieve this it would be essential to formulate a well-planned communication strategy that guides and educates customers in shaping their green experience. The success of green products is also dependent upon the effectiveness of communication of green attributes (Pickett et al., 1995). Campaigns conducted by marketers to educate people about various developments in the area of sustainability may shape their behaviour (Thrasher et al., 2011). It is important to form a communication strategy which can engage audience and ensure greater reach and conversion. Both above the line (ATL) and below the line activities (BTL) may be judiciously integrated through proper blend of different media channels to achieve the objective of changing buyer’s attitude and behaviour towards consumption. Communication through advertising media such as electronic, print and social media along with BTL activities like ground campaigns, point of purchase communication will help people to learn about sustainable consumption. Various appropriate emotional and rational appeals could be employed to reinforce the message at various touch points including point of purchase, online chat room, social websites or television serials and so on.

The use of feeling of well-being i.e. altruism may be used in communication to motivate customers towards green behaviour (Ritov & Kohemann, 1997). The satisfaction emanating from such a purchase may increase on realising that one is contributing towards welfare of society (Montoro Rios, Marinez, Moreno, & Soriano, 2006). Evoking sentiments of a sense of honour and accomplishment (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002) could prove beneficial. Emotional and functional strategies have been advocated by Hartmann et al. (2005). The use of celebrities in delivering such messages may ensure success in the Indian context. One such successful example is that of administration of polio drops where the film actor Amitabh Bachchan has been used as a spokesperson.

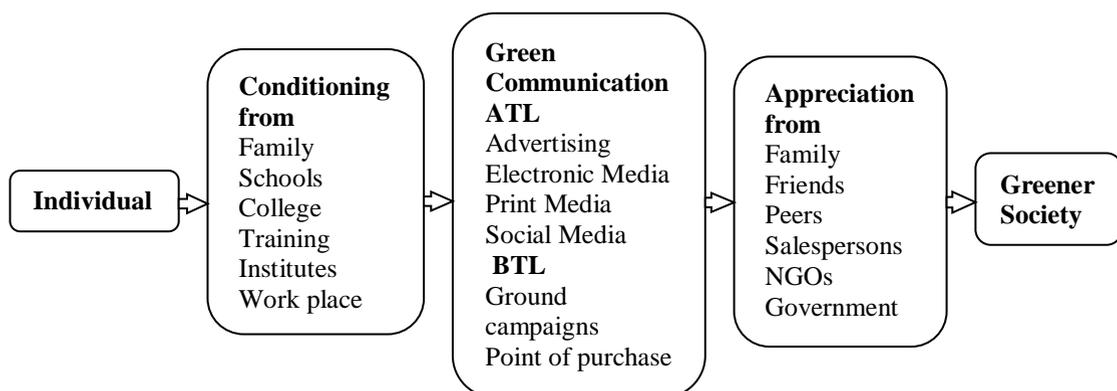
It has been found that many a time consumers are not sure about the performance and consequences of their purchase choice. The reason for this may be attributed to the availability

of a number of similar products and ambiguous information (Mitchell and Papavassiliou, 1999). This confusion is likely to lead towards creating doubt and distrust towards the intention of marketer (Foxman et al. 1992). Thus, trust building exercises and appropriate labelling may be used by companies to build a reliable relationship with customers and create a greener experience (Boswijk et al., 2005).

Cultural values of a society also impact consumer experiences. Behaviours or actions of people, whether collective or individual, are said to be dependent upon their perception of right and wrong (Pierce & Van De Veer, 1995) which in turn are derived from cultural values. It has been found that authenticity appeals the most as it resonates with the value one attaches to the appeal (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). In order to transform consumerism from mere materialism to green consumerism changes in value orientation, attitudes and behaviours are required (McKenzi-Mohr & Oskamp, 1995) which will drive consumers to satisfy their needs without harming the prospects for future generations (Pelletier & Sharp, 2008). This necessitates building a culture of sustainability that gets naturally reflected in consumer purchase behaviour. Here, the families, educational institutes, workplace and government assume a very important role. Right from the initiation of their education at the primary school the children should be provided ‘green values’ education for sustainability and this process should continue in higher education as well. Teaching pedagogy needs to be evolved around a deep consciousness for green values and reflect in the behaviour of teachers, staff and administration so that the right values and habits get instilled in students. The educational institutes or training centres that are shaping the future entrepreneurs and managers could equip their students with green skills like waste redressal, proper understanding of consequences of their actions, ability to appreciate and adopt green activities etc. which may help in bringing about a change in their existing mind-sets. The management of the various public, private and non-government organizations have to become serious in guiding their workers towards adoption of green changes in the work operations and ensure sustainability from procurement to delivery. This may require incorporation of newer methods which are pro-environment. For instance, government is a big buyer of various goods and services. It could invite tenders reflecting green concern and make only green purchases. All this necessitates that the academia, industry and the regulating authorities work together to recognise and bridge the gap from the basic green literacy to the management skills and their applications. It may pertinent to state that skills are required not only to carry out job assignments but also to serve many social purposes. Skills not only enrich the life of people but also help to contribute back to the society in the form of better lifestyle, education, etc. to future generations (HEPS, 2004).

In order to ensure that the education and communication about green values is permanently learnt by consumers it is equally important to appreciate the green buyers. This appreciation could be given by the salespersons at the point of purchase in the form of car/ two wheeler stickers stating, “I am a responsible green citizen”, SMSs from government and companies.

Fig 1: Conceptual model for greener society



It has been pointed out that the behaviour is the result of not only values but many contextual and psychological variables which may be difficult to determine and change (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003). So, studies may be carried out to identify these factors. Empirical studies may be conducted to understand the impact of corporate and government communication in changing consumer attitudes and behaviours. Further research could be done to find out how to translate green attitude into green behaviour.

CONCLUSION:

It is imperative to realize the threat of over- consumption and subsequent wastage that may act as a deterrent in the progress of a nation like India where there is a requirement for proper guidance towards pro- environmental behaviour. Marketer has a big role to play in it through their endeavours. If marketers as educators succeed in building awareness and cultivate interest among key segments it will serve a greater purpose to handle counter green issues (Bradley, Waliczek, and Zajicek, 1999). Communication through different channels at various touch points can play a crucial role in bringing society closer towards greener experience. Beyond the conventional education and literacy, there is a need for green awareness which enables the understanding of environmental issues and brings about changes in consumption and spending pattern. There is a need to develop a culture where people already engaged in green behaviour are recognised and rewarded so that they act as a motivating force for others. It is needless to say that various stakeholders have to work in a concerted manner to achieve sustainable consumption.

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