

Short Note

Understanding Environmentally Conscious Behaviour Through Environmental Identity

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Abstract This paper argues that the strongly established connection between identity and consumer behaviour may not be necessarily applicable in examining environmentally conscious behaviour through an identity lens due to several other factors that may especially influence environmental identity formation; (1) the continuously evolving nature of environmental identity in the context of complexities (i.e., political debates, climate change science) of climate change; (2) the challenges of expressing inner connection with nature (i.e., instrumental value vs. intrinsic value); (3) the various cultural and symbolic meanings associated with environmentally conscious behaviour (i.e., functional benefits vs emotional benefits) and (4) different forms of behavioural practices (i.e., environmentally conscious behaviour vs. anti-consumption). Therefore, this paper recommends utilising insights and measurements unique to environmentally conscious behaviour as opposed to that of general consumer behaviour because the antecedents of the former, especially environmental identity projections can be multifaceted.

Keywords environmentally conscious behaviour; consumer behaviour; environmental identity

Environmental identity (EI) is well established in the environmentally conscious behaviour (ECB) literature with its strong predictive ability above and beyond other antecedents such as attitudes and values [1–3]. EI research could also address the long-standing debate about the attitude and behaviour gap (i.e., consumers do not always act the way they say they will/do) in the context of ECB [4,5]. In this paper, however, we argue that utilising the construct of EI to examine ECB should be done with caution because the way in which self-identities are constructed in the context can be multifaceted. Therefore, our purpose is to present a few of those multifaceted constructs of EI in the context of ECB and suggest some future research directions. It is expected that this theoretical inquiry could inform methodological approaches of future research on ECB.

An individual's perception of self can be simply defined as self-identity. The theory of extended self [6] explains that consumers tend to purchase, use, and dispose of consumer products reflecting who they are, and who they want to be. Drawing from the classic theory, a plethora of research establishes the strong association between self-identity and consumer behaviour. This research finds that consumers perceive possessions as parts of themselves and are used as a means of expressing identities [7–10].

Extending the scholarly conversation on self-identity, Giddens ([11], p. 53) defines self-identity as “the self as reflexively understood by an individual in terms of her or his biography”. This definition stresses that self-identity cannot be seen as a passive entity, rather it is an entity subject to “time and space” ([11], p. 244). Giddens [11] argues that individuals are in the process of continuously and reflexively building a coherent and rewarding sense of identity based on their surroundings. For example, the occurrence or news about climate change could influence one's identity. Overall, the way in which an individual sees his or her self-identity is influenced by the way in which he or she deals with global environmental issues ([12], p. 121). Further, noting some of the confusing identity definitions in the literature that may mislead consumer behaviour research, Reed et al. ([13], p. 310) also propose that identity can be defined as any category label with which a consumer self-associates that is amenable to a clear picture of what a person in that category looks like, thinks, feels and does. Overall, these definitions signal the fluid and constantly evolving nature of self-identity. They also suggest that consumer objects (i.e., possessions) driven EIs make it challenging to examine the association between EI and ECB.

According to Douglas and Isherwood [14], the meanings of consumer products are socially constructed. In the context of ECB, the symbolic meanings of certain consumer products that

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Highlights of Science

claim to be environmentally friendly may not be necessarily shared across several consumer groups. Furthermore, the act of consumption may not always involve a commodity (i.e., a traded item in a market). Consumers also use other objects in engaging in a certain consumption practice, for example, consuming home-grown vegetables. Therefore, it can be stated that commodities as well as consumer-objects signify whatever a consumer wishes to express in line with their socially constructed meanings [15]. These symbolic meanings or socially constructed cultural meanings are also instrumental in conveying who they are (i.e., self-identity) [16,17] and are important to be considered by researchers in the field of ECB.

EI is defined as “a sense of connection to some part of the non-human natural environment” ([18], p. 45). Similarly, individuals’ affective, cognitive, and experiential connectedness to nature is referred to as nature-relatedness [2,19]. Kunchambo, Lee, and Brace-Govan [20] define the notion of self-nature identity as the intensity of how a consumer perceives intangible nature as part of the self. This self-nature identity can be an antecedent of EI. Thus, unlike a material consumer product or a visible consumer practice, the way in which EI is constructed in relation to intangible and non-human nature as part of the self brings several challenges to the investigative domain of ECB. Nevertheless, some attempts are not rare.

To explain the material and non-material aspect of EI, two perspectives of consumer materialism can also be drawn. From the first perspective, materialism is viewed at a personal level as an excessive regard for worldly possessions, a personal trait or a value that directs humans to accumulate possessions to gain happiness [21,22]. From the second perspective, materialism is viewed as a commonly accepted social belief system of society rather than a personal orientation [23,24] and as a sign of prosperity [25].

Soron [26] argues that EI expression in ECB is challenging due to two reasons: (a) it confronts psycho-cultural factors that maintain and expand demand for materialistic consumption, and (b) it confronts difficulties faced by ordinary consumers. Apart from being consumers, as citizens or responsible people they try to understand and respond ethically to large scale social and ecological problems [27]. Psycho-cultural factors that demand materialistic consumption can be viewed in relation to Andreou’s [28] argument that materialistic orientation may not always be antithetical to ECB. If ECB is investigated with the view of discovering subjective experiences, emotional benefits, and symbolic meanings this issue can be resolved.

It can also be seen that the notions of environmental identity, self-nature identity and nature-relatedness are referred to interchangeably in previous research due to the similarity of the meanings they convey. Over the decades, researchers have attempted to examine how individuals relate to nature and how nature-relatedness influences ECB [3,19,29]. While EI is found to be a strong predictor of ECB, the effect of the different levels of EI (i.e., nature-relatedness) on ECB is largely unknown and hence there are calls for conducting more investigations into this phenomenon [2].

Cherrier [30] argues that consumers tend to take part in an environmental movement as a means of expressing their EIs, socially connecting with consumers with similar interests in ECB and differentiating from presumably non-environmentally friendly, mainstream consumers. Research shows that collective identities of environmentally conscious consumers can explain ECB [31,32]. Collective identity is explained as a shared cognitive framework or a shared definition of a social group. Therefore, it not only provides an individual a shared sense of group belonging and a means of socially connecting, but also a means of socially differentiating. Through collective identity, individuals of a particular social group can be recognised differently from individuals of another group [33]. To this end, Kozinets and Handelman [32] find that consumer activists see themselves differently from mainstream consumers (i.e., opponents). Therefore, collectively engaging in ECB provides them with a greater sense of effectiveness and control of ECB and is instrumental in making social connections and interactions while differentiating some environmentally conscious consumers from non-environmentally friendly mainstream consumers [34].

Previous studies report that EI can be manifested in ECB in two ways. First, some individuals engage in ECB as a form of projecting their EI [12,26,34–37]. Second, some individuals engage in anti-consumption or intentional non-consumption as part of living sustainably [38]. Thus, the way they project their EI is different from the former group. Further, some radical environmentally concerned consumers (e.g., environmental activists) also reject to be identified as mainstream consumers, and often refuse to engage in specific ECB (e.g., purchase eco-labelled products) as a form of resistance to materialism [39,40]. Yet, most of the research findings are reported through qualitative investigations involving smaller samples of consumers who are up

front about ECB (e.g., environmentalists, ecologically orientated citizens, eco-communes). Further, according to a recent review [41], both ECB and anti-consumption could complement each other in projecting EI. This marks another interesting area to be further investigated by future researchers.

Finally, this short note highlighted several areas that future researchers should pay attention to. Firstly, ECB researchers should understand the fluid nature of EI which evolves in light of political debates and conversations on climate change. Secondly, the researchers should understand that it will be challenging to find measurements (i.e., proxies) of psychological connections with nature. Thirdly, various cultural and symbolic meanings and conflicting roles of consumption (citizen vs. consumer) associated with ECB should not be ignored. Finally, both ECB and anti-consumption can complement each other when individuals wish to express their EI. This will be an interesting area to be further investigated.

Author Contributions

C.R.P. conceptualised the note and wrote the first draft; L.W.J. edited the draft and added discussion.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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