

The Role of Beliefs in Purchase Decisions: A Look at Green Purchase Behaviour and Altruism

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The marketplace is overripe with choice. Being authentic and building consumer trust have never been more important. Over the past few years, business leaders have been thinking about social problems and how social problems fit into their business models. The phenomenon of “pro-social” or “purpose” marketing has become popular with companies across the nation. This type of marketing professes company beliefs and values to entice consumers to explore and experience the product or service being advertised. Finding and making an authentic connection with consumers through value expression is key to building not only a loyal brand community but a community of brand advocates.

According to Erin Nelson, former CMO of Dell, “Purpose isn’t just good for the soul, it’s actually really good for the bottom line” (Schultz et al., 2010). As a growing number of consumers claim that what a company stands for influences their purchase decision (Elliot, 2013), brands that have authentic meaning have the potential to become quite profitable.

Altruism, as defined by Batson in *Altruism in Humans*, is “a desire to benefit someone else for his or her sake rather than one’s own” (2011, p. 3). The term was first used in the early 1800s by French philosopher Auguste Comte to explain a “devotion to the interests of others as an action-guiding principle” (Paul, Miller, & Paul (eds), 1993, p. vii) and is a phenomenon still being researched and studied today. Altruism is a key value tied to social or purpose marketing. When it comes to building brand communities, how much stronger might a brand community be if altruistic values are inserted into the branding efforts?

Considering that companies are spending millions of dollars launching sustainable and environmentally friendly product lines, while consumers are purchasing more and more of these products, the problem we face is the fact that we don't know why consumers are buying these green products nor if the purchase habits are trend or value based. This research addresses this "why" and strives to develop a better understanding of what type of consumers have positive attitudes toward environmentally friendly products and in turn, why consumers purchase environmentally friendly products. Is it possible that consumers making green purchases have more in common than a simple desire to act in an environmentally friendly manner? Could their purchase behaviour and behavioural intent be tied to an expression of altruistic values or beliefs? This line of inquiry leads to the formal research question posed for this study: When it comes to green purchasing behaviours, what role does altruism play?

Researchers of green consumption, marketing, and advertising have spent much time and energy exploring the differences between a variety of green claims and a variety of consumer types, as well as consumer responses to a variety of green advertising claims (See Chan, 2000; Fowler & Close, 2012; Hartman & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009; Montoro-Rios, Luque-Martínez & Rodríguez-Molina, 2008; Stafford, Stafford and Chowdhury 1996). However, the previous literature has yet to provide empirical evidence of the potential impact of altruism or other-oriented values on the purchase of environmentally friendly products.

In an effort to measure how consumers incorporate thoughts on environmental sustainability into their purchasing decisions and whether or not altruism is a key factor, a thirty-one question survey was created and distributed. The survey was conducted online using a random sample of 325 adults 18+ in the United States. The participants were 51% female and 46% male. Eighty-two percent of the participants identified as white/Caucasian. The majority (60%) of the participants held a bachelor's degree or higher, and 56% of the participants had a household income of \$50,000 or higher. Eighteen percent of the participants were aged 18-29, 28% were aged 30-44, 33% were aged 45-60, 21% were over

60 years of age. All areas of the country were represented in the sample and over half of the sample (57%) was either married or in a domestic partnership.

Survey questions included measures for *altruism*, as well as *behavioural intent* (perceived likelihood a person will engage in a behaviour), *subjective norms* (perceived social pressure), *perceived control* (how much control one believes they have over a situation), and *attitudes* toward, and *beliefs*, about environmentally friendly products. The results of the survey show that there are strong relationships between all of the studied variables. These variables also appear to affect *behavioural intent*.

When it comes to the role of *beliefs* in green purchase behaviour/behavioural intent, the results of the survey show that *beliefs* about environmentally friendly products play a significant role, and have a statistically significant effect, on green purchase behavioural intent. In addition, *attitude* toward green purchase behaviour has a stronger relationship with green purchase *behavioural intent* than do *subjective norms* and *perceived control* (although all are strong positive correlations). What this means is that consumer beliefs regarding environmentally friendly products (EFPs) are influential in the decision-making processes related to green products. In addition, and statistically significant, *altruism* was also found to have a relationship with all of the other variables, and was found to be an indirect predictor of green purchase *behavioural intent*.

Overall, this research investigated eight hypotheses:

- H₁: Altruism predicts beliefs toward green purchase behaviour intent.
- H₂: Beliefs predict attitudes toward green purchase behaviour intent.
- H₃: Beliefs predict subjective norms regarding green purchase behaviour intent.
- H₄: Beliefs predict perceived behaviour control regarding green purchase behaviour intent.
- H₅: Attitudes toward green purchase behaviour predict behavioural intent to purchase environmentally friendly products.
- H₆: Subjective norms regarding green purchase behaviour predict behavioural intent to

purchase environmentally friendly products.

H₇: Perceived behaviour control regarding green purchase behaviour predicts behavioural intent to purchase environmentally friendly products.

H₈: Altruism predicts green purchase behaviour intent.

The first seven hypotheses were supported and the eighth was partially supported. A direct effect of *altruism* on *behavioural intent* was not found to be statistically significant; However, an indirect effect of *altruism* on *behavioural intent* through the other predictor variables was found to be statistically significant. This tells us that when it comes to green consumption, the value of altruism does play a role.

The findings in this study are adjacent to prior research that support Fisbein and Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1975) in predicting consumer behaviour. The addition of beliefs and altruism into the theoretical model, and thus the study, show the direct and indirect impact that additional variables (beliefs and altruism) can play when one considers purchasing environmentally friendly products.

In addition to theoretical implications, this research presents two additional practical implications that those in the fields of advertising, marketing, and public relations may find useful. First, marketers of environmentally friendly products (EFPs) should focus their marketing communication messages on beliefs about EFPs, as belief-related messages (such as messages regarding price, environmental impact, or even the effectiveness of the products) may have a strong impact on consumers' green purchase behavioural intent.

Second, although *subjective norms* and *perceived control* also effect green purchase behavioural intent, marketers of EFPs should also, or alternatively, consider focusing their marketing communication messages on attitudes toward EFPs as the results of the survey indicate that *attitude* has the strongest relationship with *behavioural intent*. Attitude-related messages, such as those pointing out that purchasing EFPs is worthwhile, enjoyable

or good, will most likely have a strong positive impact on consumers' green purchase behavioural intent.

Before concluding, it is important to acknowledge that this study, as with all research, has some limitations. This research utilized survey methodology. Survey methodology includes collecting self-reported data, and there is the chance that the data collected for this study are exaggerated or influenced by various participant biases. In addition to methodology drawbacks, there is the potential that additional belief variables or values, other than those explored in this study, could play a role in green purchase behavioural intent. Future research should include an investigation of additional beliefs and values to either show support for the idea that altruism is the key value impacting green consumption, or explain how other values may contribute to green purchase behavioural intent as well.

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