Chapter 5

Consumer Cooperation in Sustainability:
The Green Gap in an Emerging Market

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ABSTRACT

The planet is under threat. Unless all stakeholders, that is governments, businesses, and consumers, become more environmentally friendly, some predict dire consequences for the earth and all those who inhabit it. While governments and businesses have a role to play, green consumer behavior is vital to the sustainability of the environment. Consumers have been shown to express increasing concern for the environment, but in many studies this concern has been found not to be matched by actions, a phenomenon labelled the green gap. This chapter describes a study that investigated the existence and extent of the green gap amongst a sample of South African adult consumers and sought to determine possible reasons for a lack of green behavior. Recommendations are made to marketers and policy makers to encourage consumer cooperation in environmental sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

António Guterres, the United Nations Secretary General, warns that climate change and competition for scarce natural resources threaten peace and sustainable development globally and that protecting the environment and having an emphasis...
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on environment prevention methods is imperative (United Nations, 2016). There are
two main drivers of the human impact on the environment, namely population and
consumption (de Sherbinin, Carr, Cassels, & Jiang, 2007). The last century has seen
an increase in the global population, which has resulted in an increase in the food
consumption and a deterioration of the environment caused by over consumption
and an increase in the use of natural resources (Chen & Chai, 2010). The global
population has more than tripled in the last century from an estimated 1.5 living on
earth in 2003 to 6.3 billion people and there is a prediction that the population will
reach 9.7 billion by 2050 (United Nations, 2015). Most of this growth will come
from emerging markets.

From a marketing perspective an increase in the number of people and their
consumption levels may be seen as advantageous since products are being
consumed. However thirty to forty percent of the environmental issues are caused
by the consumption patterns of human beings (Chan, 2001) thus the decisions and
behaviours of consumers have a significant impact on the environment (Tobler,
Visschers, & Siegrist, 2012). Climate change, global warming, deforestation,
pollution and depletion of the ozone layer are just some of the global environmental
crises facing the world (Juwaheer, 2005). These environmental issues give rise to
environmental concern amongst governments, activist groups, some businesses and
some consumers, which has led to the emergence of the green economy consisting
of green or pro-environment governments, companies, marketers and consumers.
Global consumers’ cooperation in achieving global sustainability is arguably more
important than government or business actions as consumers have the greatest impact
on sustainability or the lack thereof.

In most studies on environmental concern, it has been found that people are
concerned with their impact on the environment and the deterioration thereof
(Takács-Sánta, 2007) and these levels of concern have been increasing especially
in the last three decades (Kim & Choi, 2005; Synodinos & Bevan-Dye, 2014). This
increase in environment concern should translate into green consumer behaviour,
i.e. the purchase and use of products and services which are environmental friendly.
While some prior research studies indicate a significant positive relationship between
environmental concern and green consumer behaviours (Davari & Strutton, 2014;
Kim & Choi, 2005) with some even finding environmental concern to be a predictor
of green consumer behaviours (Sinnappan & Rahman, 2011), this is not always the
case. Other researchers have found that more consumers in the modern society are
concerned about the environment than has translated into environmentally friendly
behaviours and the purchase of green products (Fisher, Bachman, & Bashyal, 2012;
Flynn, Bellaby, & Ricci, 2009; Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). This gap
between green concern and green behaviour is known as the ‘green gap’ (Kennedy,
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