What's your excuse? Cognitive dissonance and justifications for non-sustainable behaviour

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Acknowledgements:
This research has been funded by the Swiss Innovation Agency INNOSUISSE No. 56782.1 IP-SBM and the company YAPEAL with Abacus Research and Bank Vontobel.

Cite as:
Seyr Sarah, Gächter Ingo, Mohr Seraina, Georgi Dominik, Lu Guang (2023), What's your excuse? Cognitive dissonance and justifications for non-sustainable behaviour. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 52nd, (114412)

Paper from the 52nd Annual EMAC Conference, Odense/Denmark, May 23-26, 2023

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Abstract

Awareness and sustainable intentions do not necessarily result in sustainable behaviour. This intention–behaviour discrepancy is associated with cognitive dissonance and experienced as ambiguity. Our study explores conscious non-sustainable consumer decisions and ambiguous justifications. We aim to identify those areas of life where arguments can make a difference and lead to more sustainable behaviour because ambiguities are conscious and rationally justified. Surprisingly, in 30 in-depth interviews, we find that all respondents experience conscious intention–behaviour gaps. They report ambiguities and justifications in 7 and 10 areas of life, respectively. We highlight that the highest potential for more sustainable behaviour lies in economic rationalisation. Here, most ambiguities and justifications are perceived as personal ineffectiveness. Ultimately, we argue that the presence of active (cognitive) effort offers a significant opportunity for change and more sustainable decisions.

Keywords: (non-)sustainable consumer behaviour, sustainability ambiguity, unsustainability justifications

Track: Consumer Behaviour

1. Introduction

Consumers do not consistently act according to their values or best intentions regarding sustainable behaviour (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010; ElHaffar, Durif, & Dubé, 2020). The intention–behaviour gap, motivation–behaviour gap or green gap defines "the inconsistency between what the individual says regarding his/her growing concern about the environmental problems and what he/she does in terms of actions, behaviors, and contributions to lessen the consequences of these problems" (ElHaffar et al., 2020, p. 4). Consumers are conscious about their non-sustainable behaviour (Gregory-Smith, Smith, & Winklhofer, 2013).

Information, transparency and awareness about sustainability are important initial steps in encouraging people to behave more sustainably. Consumer behaviour is influenced by consumption beliefs, attitudes and intentions (Longo, Shankar, & Nuttall, 2019). For example, providing information that targets the key factors influencing the intention to purchase green electricity leads to a significant increase in green electricity market share (Litvine & Wüstenhagen, 2011). Combined with perceptions of behavioural control, intentions account for considerable variance in actual behaviour (see the theory of planned behaviour; Ajzen, 1991).

Habits support sustainable behaviour to a certain extent (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014). Habits are not fully conscious forms of behaviour. While they are effective, consumers are not fully capable of controlling their habitual behaviour and do not make conscious choices for sustainability. The unconsciousness of habits requires targeted design from another instance, an institution, policies or a specific context to trigger the formation of habits for sustainable behaviour (Maréchal, 2010). Consumers can thus be influenced or nudged towards more sustainable shopping behaviour, but this does not mark a conscious choice. "There is discrepancy between what consumers think should influence behavior and what actually does influence behavior" (Kristensson, Wästlund, and Söderlund 2017, p. 22). Nevertheless, their conscious, rational and cognitive arguments should at least offer no excuse for non-sustainable behaviour so that behavioural change is the only option left (Kristensson et al. 2017).

Achieving the desired outcome requires consumers' (conscious) prioritisation of ethical concerns and willingness to make a commitment and sacrifice for the common good

(Carrington et al., 2014).

In this study, we explore the conscious part of consumers' non-sustainable decision making and behaviour. Sustainability loses the argument when discrepancies in real behaviour become conscious and consumers develop active strategies for cognitive coping. We focus on the reported experiences of ambiguity and conscious justifications. Above all, we find that the presence of active (cognitive) effort provides a significant opportunity for change and more sustainable decisions.

2. Cognitive dissonance and justifications for non-sustainable behaviour

Sometimes, it seems that people just cannot make the right choices. In such cases, their minds fall into a state of cognitive dissonance, experiencing conflicting states, for example, when they do not act according to their values. Cognitive dissonance describes both an condition that also leads to activity oriented toward dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957). Thus, cognitive dissonance requires effort to reduce it. Coping strategies describe the active cognitive and/or behavioural effort to deal with conflicting states of mind. Problem-oriented coping describes an active or a passive behavioural effort to deal with the situation either by changing or avoiding it. Emotional coping refers to an active or a passive effort to deal with one's state of mind, either by improving or distracting oneself from it (Reference hidden).

While people can use a mix of coping strategies, their coping approach mainly focuses on regulating their emotions evoked by their non-sustainable behaviour rather than changing their consumption practices (Folkman and Lazarus 1980). Cognitive dissonance is associated with negative emotions, guilt being the most salient emotion, requiring guilt management to restore comfort while not changing the contradictory behaviour (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013). For instance, in a study on sustainable tourism, the participants display an attitude–behaviour gap and the associated discomfort. However, instead of changing their behaviour, they offer a wide range of explanations justifying their tourist activities (Juvan & Dolnicar, 2014). While cognitive dissonance and cognitive coping strategies cannot be observed directly, verbal justifications provide insights. Justifications manifest the green gap; instead of changing the non-sustainable behaviour, ambiguities are consciously rationalised.

Justification strategies can be clustered into economic rationalisation, institutional dependency and developmental realism. Economic rationalisation summarises the value-for-money arguments that obliterate ethical beliefs. Institutional dependency describes

the attribution of responsibility to institutions, such as the government. Developmental realism refers to the belief that the economy in itself cannot be ethical on a macro level (Eckhardt, Belk, & Devinney, 2010).

People report "good reasons" and conscious weighting of pros and cons to justify not going green. They compare the benefits (financial or emotional) of a product with the costs (in terms of money, time or energy) paid to obtain it, the price being the most commonly noted reason (Biswas, 2017; Gleim & Lawson, 2014). Further reported factors are the poor perceptions of quality, lack of green product availability and brand loyalty to conventional products (Gleim & Lawson, 2014).

These justifications absolve people of their non-sustainable behaviour and neutralise its associated negative emotions. Another method involves compensating for non-sustainable behaviour over time or among different areas. Mental accounting is often used within short time frames to compensate for non-sustainable choices by making sustainable ones later on and vice versa (Gregory-Smith et al., 2013). If there is compensation between the two types of mental accounts, neutralisation is no longer used to justify the choice of non-sustainable vacations, for example. Mental accounting seems to have rendered neutralisation obsolete (Schütte & Gregory-Smith, 2015).

Justifications can also become socially repetitive and thus further legitimised. The repeated reinforcement of neutralising patterns and of feedback loops between individuals and society further manifests the green gap (Gruber & Schlegelmilch, 2014). For this reason, it is important to consciously break the cycle of arguments and justifications for non-sustainable consumption behaviour.

3. Methodology

In this research, we adopt a phenomenological interpretive approach aimed to provide rich personal accounts of non-sustainable consumption practices, experiences of ambiguity and justifications in different consumption areas (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

In total, 30 semi-structured interviews with German-speaking residents of Switzerland were conducted, each lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. The interviewees were recruited by means of heterogeneous purposive sampling screening of respondents who were satisfied or unsatisfied with their own green consumption practices, reflecting the ecological dimension of the sustainability construct, on one hand, and respondents who felt that they managed their

own finances well or poorly, reflecting the economic dimension of the sustainability construct, on the other hand. Fourteen interviews were conducted with “green” consumers, who did not yet live and consume sustainably enough and spend more money than they intended. Eleven interviews were conducted with average consumers. Five interviews were conducted with frugal consumers. These respondents reported that they were satisfied with their own sustainable consumption behaviour and managed their finances well, that is, no remorseful or wasteful spending. Those individuals who were satisfied with their own sustainable consumption practices but did not manage their finances well were excluded from the sample since they were unlikely to have spare financial resources that could be allocated to more sustainable consumption. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of age, occupation, home ownership and income. The respondents’ ages ranged between 18 and 64 years. They worked in a variety of professions; some respondents owned a house, while others rented an apartment.

The data were gathered between May and August 2022 from in-depth interviews to account for the interpretive paradigm (Larkin et al., 2006). In line with the phenomenological stance, the interview questions were open and carefully worded to encourage narration focusing on (non-)sustainable consumption practices and the ensuing (dis)satisfaction. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with MaxQD and analysed with the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach (Larkin et al., 2006). To identify and cluster the statements on ambiguities and justifications, the transcribed text was analysed in three rounds, by manually coding, discussing the initial categorisation and refining the code system with different researchers.

4. Results

All respondents show awareness of sustainability issues and report both sustainable and non-sustainable behaviour. They experience ambivalence or inner conflicts in 7 areas (28 mentions) and report 10 types of justification arguments (98 mentions), which can be mapped with the three justification strategy clusters shown in Table I: economic rationalisation, institutional dependency and developmental realism (Eckhardt et al., 2010).

Table I. Ambiguity and justification mentions per cluster

Justification strategy cluster (Eckhardt et al., 2010)	**Ambiguity**	**n = 28**	**Justification**	**n = 98**
Economic rationalisation	Price vs. sustainability	6	Saving time	17
	Nice things vs. sustainability	3	Convenience	17
	Quality vs. sustainability	2	No alternatives	12
	Save/spend money	1	Higher costs	7
			Lack of awareness	2
Institutional dependency	Intention vs. influence	6	No influence	8
	Will vs. non-transparency	6	Government is in charge	5
Developmental realism	Value vs. compensation	4	No justification	14
			Mental accounting	12
			Social comparison	4

4.1 Economic rationalisation

Overall, the economic rationalisation cluster contains the most mentions of ambiguity (12 mentions) and justifications (55 mentions). The most prominent ambiguity in this cluster is price vs. sustainability (6 mentions). The interviewees state that they try to act sustainably but sometimes lack the money to do so and often feel guilty after their purchase. Higher costs are also justifications for non-sustainable behaviour (7 mentions). Once a product or a service is sustainable, it is perceived as more expensive than an ainable alternative.

Further ambiguities are experienced when the participants prefer having nice things even if these are non-sustainable (3 mentions). The participants want to enrich themselves materially but suffer from a guilty conscience in doing so or afterwards. One interviewee (1 mention) actually wants to save money but still likes to treat himself/herself to something. The

participants also say that quality is more important than sustainability (2 mentions); they want durable material, which is sometimes less sustainable.

The most prominent justifications are saving time and convenience (17 mentions each). One explanation is that limited vacation time is the cause for flying (instead of riding the train) to save time. Convenience is more important than sustainability; for instance, when someone is already a customer of an non-sustainable provider and appreciates its products or services, then a change becomes difficult. To cite another example, taking a trip by car is perceived as more comfortable than using public transport. Furthermore, there are 12 mentions of having no alternatives. For example, overseas destinations are impossible to reach without enormous expense. Finally, it is pointed out thatsometimes, it is simply a lack of awareness (2 mentions), and there is a single mention of wanting to spend less money in general.

4.2 Institutional dependency

Overall, the second most frequently mentioned ambiguity is that one's own actions have no influence (6 mentions). People would reconsider their actions but see no influence on sustainability at the macro level. Likewise, eight justification mentions related to sustainability are outside the sphere of influence. For example, if someone lives in a rented apartment, one has no option about the source of heating. If a person lives in a single household, the individual is forced to buy large quantities of perishable items because there are often no smaller ones on offer, which can lead to food waste.

The ambiguity of good will vs. non-transparency is mentioned equally often (6 mentions); people would like to act in good will but are partly overwhelmed by the complexity of sustainable labels or decisions or feel powerless on their own. Thus, the government must look for sustainability (5 mentions): more regulations must be set up at the political level, which can increase sustainability, and certain products should be banned so that they can no longer be used. Since sustainable products are usually more expensive, subsidies should be introduced to compensate for the added costs so that everyone can afford sustainability.

4.3 Developmental realism

People's own values and compensation strategies for non-sustainable behaviour are discussed critically (4 mentions). Correspondingly, there are 12 justification mentions of balancing strategies, outweighing non-sustainable behaviour in one area with sustainable

behaviour in another. For example, if one does not fly, one may drive a motorcycle or a car more for fun. Another instance is that when one flies somewhere, the person stays longer than one or two days and justifies the flight.

In 12 mentions, the interviewees report not wanting to justify a certain behaviour because they do not want to live without specific things like flying or driving a car. In 4 mentions, non-sustainable behaviour is justified through social comparison: “Why should a person limit oneself compared to others?” This is especially true if one already perceives oneself as a rather below-average CO2 consumer. Comparisons to other cultures or countries that are far more non-sustainable are also reported and therefore justify certain behaviour.

5. Discussion

The findings from 30 in-depth interviews with consumers in Switzerland confirm that the respondents are fully aware of their (non-)sustainable behaviour and actively engage in coping with cognitive dissonance. Furthermore, the detailed reports provide insights into the justifications that are already manifested and into the areas of unresolved cognitive dissonance. Interestingly, the number of reported justifications is double than that of reported ambiguity. This could indicate that justifications simply work in reducing ambiguity overall. Our findings also provide insights into some areas where currently, cognitive dissonance is not yet resolved. In the economic rationalisation cluster, the reported justifications seem to be repeated and socially accepted, while institutional dependency and developmental realism provide more information about perceived consumer efficiency. Where there is experienced ambiguity, the need for coping remains. Following this rationale, there is still an opportunity to switch from emotional to problem-solving coping.

Addressing the most prominent ambiguities, campaigns can focus more on emphasising consumer effectiveness and transparency, providing direct feedback on (non-)sustainable behaviour and its impact. When personal responsibility is obvious, consumers make more sustainable buying decisions (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014). Affordable alternatives and real compensation options might also be added to the list of ideas for more sustainable behaviour. The more committed the consumers are, the more they adopt problem-centred, assertive strategies (Bingen, Sage, & Sirieix, 2010).

Addressing the most prominent justifications, one might think that little can be done when people prefer to have it their way and (not) justify non-sustainable behaviour with other

priorities. Nonetheless, breaking the cycle of reinforcement and tearing arguments apart might make resorting to excuses more difficult. Instead, offering alternative arguments for sustainable behaviour and sacrifice for the common good, such as gaining autonomy, competence, mental space, awareness and positive emotions, could thrust the debate to a more positive direction (Lloyd & Pennington, 2020).

While this research is focused on conscious and rational behaviour, there is no argument for prioritising one over the other; unconscious and subconscious strategies such as nudging can be implemented together with conscious, rational and cognitive arguments. The latter should leave no space for excuses so that problem-focused coping is the only option left (Kristensson et al., 2017). Knowledge of the current ambiguities and justifications can actually help in both providing alternative arguments and leaving no space for unconscious and subconscious ways of escape.

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