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Behavior and Information: Does Media Promote Consumerism?

Consumer behavior is well recognized as a vital component in dealing with climate change. In this regard, it is important to understand both which mechanisms promote pro-environmental behavior, and which instruments stimulate unsustainable consumer activities. This policy brief summarizes the results from a study on how media use can promote consumerism. Based on a 2022 online-survey of Belarus's urban population, the study empirically assesses how exposure to information promoting overconsumption can impact unsustainable actions. The findings show that consumerism media use has a positive effect on unsustainable consumption behavior. To mitigate the impact and promote sustainable behavior, media could be obligated to provide information about the negative footprint of unsustainable consumption.

Introduction

Consumer behavior holds large potential when it comes to climate change and other environmental problems. According to Moran et al. (2020), changes in consumer behavior could lead to a European Union (EU) carbon footprint reduction by approximately 25 percent.

There are two conflicting streams of literature on the effects of media use on consumer behavior. The first strand states that media use exerts a positive effect on pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (Holbert et al. 2003; Wang & Hao, 2018) while the second declares that media use (in particular, the Internet) promotes consumerism (Simeone & Scarpato, 2020).

The objective of the study underlying this policy brief is to contribute to this debate by exploring whether media use positively affects unsustainable consumption behavior, drawing on data from a nationally representative online survey in Belarus.

Behavior and its Determinants

The study's conceptual approach rests on the Attitude-Behavior-Context (ABC) theory (Guagnano et al., 1995; Gardner and Stern, 1996; Stern, 2000) which states that behavior is a product of attitudinal variables (norms, beliefs, values), contextual factors (e.g., interpersonal influences, media, community expectations, monetary incentives and costs) and personal capabilities (e.g., knowledge and skills).

With the ABC theory in mind, and also driven by prior empirical studies (e.g., Huang, 2016), the study explores how unsustainable consumption behavior can be affected by materialistic values, environmental self-efficacy (in the study perceived as a combination of values and personal knowledge), and consumerism media use.

We define *unsustainable consumption behavior* as conspicuous buying, which describes acquiring expensive, and luxury goods or services in order

to impress others and gather prestige through objects (Rook, 1987; Pellegrino & Shannon, 2021).

Media use in general means exposure or attention to both traditional media, such as newspapers, TV, and radio, and the Internet (Huang, 2016). *Consumerism media use* in our study refers to the exposure on these media channels to information promoting a luxurious lifestyle and the idea that buying more leads to happiness.

According to Hurst et al. (2013), materialism can be more easily targeted and changed than personality traits, which are more stable. Besides, theoretical and empirical evidence suggests that materialistic values are negatively associated with pro-environmental behavior. To measure *materialism as a value* we employ the short version of the Materialistic Values Scale (Richins, 2004), which assesses beliefs about the importance of material possession.

Environmental self-efficacy, also known as perceived consumer effectiveness, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to make a meaningful impact through their efforts (Ellen et al., 1991). We hypothesize that environmental self-efficacy should be negatively associated with unsustainable consumption behavior.

To operationalize the above constructs (see Table 1), the study uses data from a nationally representative online survey among the urban Belarusian population aged 18-75, conducted in April 2022 by MIA Research on behalf of BEROC. The sample size includes 1029 participants.



Table 1. Descriptive statistics of each construct's indicators

Indicator	Mean	SD
Unsustainable consumption behavior^a		
Updating your household appliances to the best models on the market	1.758	0.591
Updating your electronic devices to the newer models (your mobile phone, TV, computer) on the market	1.901	0.593
Buying luxury products (for example, brand-name clothing, gold or diamond jewelry, expensive cosmetic of foreign brands)	1.397	0.575
Consumerism media use^b		
Exposure to the information promoting luxurious lifestyle and buying more stuff to be happy on TV	1.729	1.283
Exposure to the to the information promoting luxurious lifestyle and buying more stuff to be happy in the newspapers	0.889	0.982
Exposure to the to the information promoting luxurious lifestyle and buying more stuff to be happy on the radio	1.080	1.048
Exposure to the to the information promoting luxurious lifestyle and buying more stuff to be happy on the Internet	2.914	0.988
Materialistic values^c		
I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes	2.666	0.998
I like a lot of luxury in my life	2.871	1.043
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things	3.405	1.020
Environmental self-efficacy^c		
I believe that I have the ability to take action to help the environment	3.539	0.854
I can change my behavior to be more environmentally friendly, even when it costs more money or takes more time	3.467	0.892

Note: a Four-point Likert scale (1=never, 4=always). b Four-point Likert scale (1=never; 4=very often; 0=I do not use this type of media). c Five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

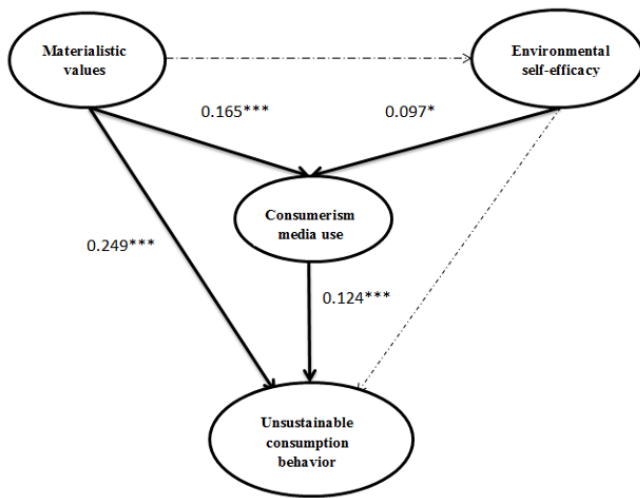
As seen in Table 1, consumers in Belarus are mostly exposed to the information promoting luxurious lifestyle and buying more goods to be happy on the Internet, relative to other media channels. Another interesting outcome is that Belarusian consumers are more likely to perceive material possessions as a source of happiness compared to the other domains of the classical material value triad; success, centrality, and happiness (Richins and Dawson (1992) and Richins (2004), where success refers to using possessions to evaluate the success of oneself and others centrality refers to the central role of possessions in a person's life, and happiness reflects the belief that happiness and life satisfaction are achieved through possessions and their acquisition.

Assessment of the Unsustainable Consumption Behavior Model

The study estimates the structural equation model for unsustainable consumption behavior. The main hypothesis of the study is that consumerism media use might exert a positive influence on unsustainable consumption behavior. Materialistic values as well as environmental self-efficacy can also affect unsustainable consumption behavior. As both our values and beliefs may to some extent determine the context in which we live, we assume that materialistic values and environmental self-efficacy might impact consumerism media use. Additionally, we assume that materialistic values can have a negative influence on environmental self-efficacy. Figure 1 details the path diagram with maximum-likelihood estimates of fully standardized coefficients.



Figure 1. Path diagram of the structural equation model explaining unsustainable consumption behavior



Note: standardized coefficients; solid line denotes significant path; dashed line denotes insignificant relationships. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$

The results show that consumerism media use has a positive, and significant effect on unsustainable consumption behavior (0.124; standard deviation change). The possible channel leading to these findings is the emotions at play. Advertisements promoting a luxurious lifestyle and buying more things to be happy can elicit quite strong emotions in consumers related to happiness and success in life. Around two decades ago a large body of literature in consumer research emerged on the role of emotions in decision-making (for an overview see Laros & Steenkamp, 2005). Recent experimental studies about adoption of sustainable innovations (e.g. Contzen et al., 2021 (a); Contzen et al., 2021 (b)) also prove the role emotions play in consumer behavior.

Materialistic values are another significant contributor to unsustainable actions (0.249 standard deviation change). As expected, materialistic values also exert a positive and statistically significant effect on consumerism media use (0.165 standard deviation change). However, contrary to our expectations, environmental self-efficacy does not exert a direct negative impact on unsustainable behavior (dashed line in Figure 1).

Conclusion

The results from the structural equation model show that consumerism media use exerts a positive moderate effect on unsustainable consumption behavior of the urban population in Belarus. This effect is statistically significant.

To reduce the negative environmental impact of unsustainable behavior, policymakers should, thus, target regulation that downplays the emotional appeal of ads promoting excessive consumption and stresses the adverse environmental effects of consumerism. This could include, for example, policies requiring ads to contain information about the environmental footprint of the product, from production to its full lifecycle.

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