

GREEN PRODUCTS AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Due to the increasing of environmental awareness, consumers nowadays tend to pay more attention to the safety of personal care items and products that claim to offer environmental benefits. Over the years, both consumers awareness and consumers attitudes towards sustainable or “green” brands have increased significantly. The purpose of this thesis is to affirm this conclusion reached by the authors of scientific articles for Albania as a case study.

From the questionnaire conducted online with 268 participants, in the beginning of the analyses we concluded that Albanian consumers have information and knowledge regarding the term “green” products, also some of them are users of these products and prefer them compared to traditional products as a result of greater quality and bigger benefits. But by the end of the analysis, we saw that despite the qualities highlighted and pointed out by participating consumers, and the possible reasons for using green products, their behaviour does not comply with these thoughts of theirs. What is most important during this research is the low exposure of green products or brands in Albania, creating major constraints on finding and disposing of these products for the Albanian consumer.

Keywords: *Green products, green consumption, green marketing, green shopping, social ethics, social dilemmas, consumer behaviour*

1. INTRODUCTION

The past decades have witnessed rapid economic growth through increasing consumer consumption worldwide. This, on the other hand, causes deterioration of the environment through excessive consumption and exploitation of natural resources. The consequences of environmental degradation are global warming, stratospheric ozone depletion, sea and river pollution, noise and light pollution, acid rain and desertification. As a result of these last years the concept of green product is widely used.

Generally, the green product is designed or manufactured in a way that minimizes the environmental impact involved in its production, distribution and consumption. This may include the use of recyclable materials, biodegradable elements and components.

While ethical consumption is used to explain socially conscious consumer behavior by focusing on social goals, ideals, and ideology (Culiberg, 2013). In ethical consumption, consumers under-

stand that their behavior will have consequences in their society and can bring important social changes.

This paper aims to study the concept of green products, as a new practice of these recent years, conducted from the need to come to aid to the environment, which is degrading more and more every day. The study also seeks to find a relevance between consumers’ beliefs and ethics regarding these products and the behavior that these consumers hold towards them.

Through this paper it is intended to define the main concepts for green products and green purchases; explain the relation between green products and consumer behavior towards these products; give some factors that affect consumer belief in green products and consequently the attitude of consumers; to conclude about how dilemmas and social responsibilities affect the consumer and his behavior. As such this research addresses the following research questions:

“Is there a relation between brand awareness,

perceived quality and purchase intention?"

"Is green product brand awareness positively related to the purpose of the purchase?"

"Do consumer ethical beliefs and social dilemmas have a positive and significant effect on the purpose of green shopping?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the increasing of environmental awareness, consumers nowadays tend to pay more attention to the safety of personal care items and products that claim to offer environmental benefits. Over the years, both consumers awareness and consumers attitudes towards sustainable or "green" brands have increased significantly. However, consumers are acting differently from their purpose.

Rising environmental awareness and green consumption trends have shown a critical need for consumer research for this emerging market. Studies discuss the issue of eco-friendly consumption of consumer products that have gained mostly attention (T. Ramayah, J. W. C. Lee, and O. Mohamad, 2010), (Y. Strizhakova and R. A. Coulter, 2013).

Although "green" thinking is increasing on the minds of consumers, they still struggle with their role in the product life cycle with an environmental benefit. Moreover, consumers seem to have lack of information to verify the responsibility of green products. Branding enables consumers to judge product quality and find manufacturers who should be responsible for products (N. F. Koehn, 2001). Therefore, environmental concern and brand knowledge are likely to be both critical factors influencing the intent of consumers to purchase green products (M. Wheeler, A. Sharp, and M. N. Thiel, 2013).

Despite the fact that consumers have expressed their concerns about the global environment and the sustainable increase in sales of green products, the market share of these products is still very small (MR Gleim, JS Smith, D. Andrews, and JJ Cronin Jr. 2013). Previous studies have suggested that the relationship between "green" attitudes and environment-oriented behavior is quite weak (B. Martin and A. C. Simintiras, 1995). Although consumers express their concern for the environment this does not necessarily convert

into green purchases. Consumers continue to embrace sustainable alternatives to traditional consumption. There seems to be a gap between consumers attitudes and their behaviour towards green products.

2.1 GREEN PRODUCTS

In general, the green product is designed or manufactured in a way that minimizes the environmental impact involved in its production, distribution and consumption (L. Tomasin, G. M. Pereira, M. Borchardt, and M. A. Sellitto, 2013). This may include the use of recyclable materials, biodegradable elements and components (GA Blengini, M. Busto, M. Fantoni, and D. Fino, 2012), (HM Wee, MC Lee, JCP Yu, and CE Wang, 2011).

In fact, there are some characteristics that a product should have to be considered a "green" product (S. C. Tseng and S. W. Hung, 2013). Some criteria are: These products are easily reused using natural and / or renewable resources; Contain recycled content; Easily recycled; Biodegradable; Energy efficient; And are durable with low maintenance requirements.

Thus, green products can be described as products with less environmental impact and less harmful to human health than their substitutes (L. J. Shrum, J. A. McCarty, and T. M. Lowrey, 1995). The growing public awareness of environmental degradation has resulted in the well-functioning of green marketing or environmentally responsible practice for firms in some industries.

2.2 HOW MUCH DO GREEN PRODUCTS AFFECT THE MARKET AND CONSUMER CHOICES?

Green policy has set a criteria that influences consumer buying behavior from the perspective of traders. Follows and Jobber (2000) provided the definition that environmentally responsible products generally tend to be viewed as socially acceptable choices.

Expanding the product line to so-called green products and services is a new brand strategy for them to benefit to a "caring and responsible" image and personality.

Many organic and green products are already produced by many manufacturers. In 2009, the number of green products on retail shelves in

the United States increased by 72%, according to Terra Choice. "Going Green" is an initiative that helps brands smartly expand their product line, introduce a different identity, and make consumers pay more attention to the environment in their choices. Examples of extensions for brand lines are increasing (e.g. Procter and Gamble similarly reduces water consumption by increasing the strength of the liquid detergent and reducing the packing mass. It uses a simple packaging plastic which is lightweight for recycling, such as the packaging for Pantene shampoo.etc)

Efforts by most vehicle companies to produce cars electric and hybrids, also help to change the brand image.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data used in this thesis are primary and secondary data, taken from scientific articles, provided in Google Scholar and which are quoted, as well as primary data extracted from the questionnaire conducted by me and distributed and completed online. The primary methodology is the survey to gather the data. The strategy is duo-method.

Data collection. I chose to use the questionnaire technique for data collection, as being the most usable and easiest technique for such studies and for quantitative data collection. The questionnaire is easy structured and the respondents simply answered by clicking on the options that were ready for them for the closed questions, or by placing their respective answers in the open questions as well as in the last questions giving their opinion and suggestions on the questionnaire topic.

The questionnaire has 20 questions and contains general data about 268 respondents such as gender, age, education, income, as well as other questions related to green products, their knowledge and brands and also the impact they have had on behavior consumers. The questionnaire was distributed on social networks who led in becoming the source of primary data used in this paper.

4. STUDY RESULTS

In the questionnaire distributed online for the purpose of my analysis, participated 268 people,

who gave their ideas and answers based on personal experiences and knowledges they had about green brands.

Question 1: Gender

Most of the people who participated in the study were female, about 84%, a very high percentage compared to males who participated about 16%. Such a division will also have its impact on the given answers as women are more committed to shopping, especially in "green" shopping, focusing on cosmetic products. Males were less interested to this questionnaire as they showed that they had less information on green products.

Question 2: Age

As it is shown in the graph below, most of the participants were 21 years old, since the questionnaire was distributed among colleagues of different groups that were almost the same age. So the largest number of participants were 21 years old with 37.8%, 22 years old with 24.3%, 23 years old with 13.5% and 20 years old with 8.1%, creating the most important age group for the analysis of the questionnaire 20-23 years old. To analyze the answers, this presence of young people is quite satisfactory, since the concept of green products, or "green" purchases, are new and related to what has happened in the environment in recent years, which is less familiar for old age people.

Question 3: Education

By asking the participants about their education I wanted to find a relation, if there exists any, between culture and information received in school and how they affected the level of knowledges participants had about green products as well as the impact of this knowledge gained on their purchases. The participants of this questionnaire are mostly with a university and post-university degree about 18.2% and 69.1%, while a small part with secondary education, 12.7%. From the answers received, most of the respondents who said that had knowledge about green products and who also gave more opinions and ideas were in fact with a Bachelor and a Master degree, which suggests that with the increase of the educational level, the knowledge on delicate issues that affect us all increases, as well as issues that are

considered ethical dilemmas, such as the use of green products.

Question 4: Monthly income level

The income level of the participants is very important, because there are many consumers who are affected from the price of the product in order to make a purchase. So, even though they have a lot of information about the product and their desire to buy is high, the incomes limits many of them.

The graph shows that most of the respondents belong to the level of income 0-30000 ALL, which can be said that is somewhat normal considering that the participants are still in college or newly graduated. It is therefore normal for them to be employed in part-time jobs, or perhaps in jobs that are not yet paid at higher levels as a result of lack of experience. The next interval with higher % is the income level 30001-50000 with 22.1%, followed by other intervals with fewer participants.

Considering that most had such income levels, this affects further responses that although participants have knowledge of green products, they are not always their users as their purchases may be considered costly.

Question 5: Are you informed about green products or brands?

As I mentioned above most of the respondents had knowledge about green brands. About 53% said they were informed about green products or brands, while the remaining 47% had no knowledge. Such a result is positive for our analysis as we will be able to get as much information on the following questions from participants familiar with these green products.

Question 6: If yes, what products do you know and why do you consider them green?

This question was left open to allow respondents to freely express their opinions and to obtain information about the products they use and the reasons why they consider them green products.

Almost all respondents who answered this question indicated that they consider green products to be any product that is environmentally friendly, organically grown, and suitable for

recycling.

In terms of the type of products, most of the responses were from women who indicated that they use a lot of cosmetic products with plant-based ingredients and with green labels. There are also responses about organic foods and their packaging or packaging that is recyclable and environmentally friendly.

Question 7: Have you heard of green consumption and ecological labels?

I also involved in the questionnaire more questions to find out how informed respondents were not only about specific green products, but also about the concept of green consumption and ecolabels themselves. And the responses were quite positive. Of the 268 participants, 73% had some knowledge, even basic, about green consumption and ecolabels. So, the people who participated in this study are aware of these phenomena, which have become more and more vulnerable in recent years, also as a result of the changes in the environment and the increasing number of natural disasters. This is an expected result if we establish a correlation with the age group predominant in the analysis and their level of education. Nevertheless, the concept of ecolabels is still unknown and also slightly reviewed in the literature, so it was a valuable result that most of the participants had heard or were informed about it.

Question 8: Are you influenced in your purchases by green labels?

Most of the questionnaire participants stated that they are influenced by the products with green label when making their purchases. About 68% are sensitive consumers and demand that the products they use should be environmentally friendly, have non-harmful and recyclable packaging, be organic and chemical-free products used in them. These consumers prefer to use healthy products for them and with minimal negative impact on the environment, compared to other benefits offered by products without green label.

While the remaining 32% stated that they are not affected by their purchases of products with green label. These may be the part of the participants who have never tried green products, or who do

not know how to distinguish them. They may also be the part of consumers who do not think in the long run about the benefits to their health or the damage caused to the environment.

Question 9: Do you prefer buying traditional or green products?

This question is made to directly understand how much consumers use green products compared to traditional ones, regardless of the reasons that lead to such a choice. Most of the answers to this question were not what we expected. From analysing the data collected, we concluded that 33% of the participants used only traditional products. There are many reasons that may have influenced such preferences, despite the great knowledge that the participants had. Some of them are strong loyal consumers of the products they have always used, preferring not to change their purchases even though they are presented with other, perhaps even healthier options. Some others might be price sensitive and despite the desire or information of the benefits they can get, money limits their purchases. They may also be the part of consumers who do not have knowledge about the benefits of these products or the little information they have makes them more skeptical about them.

Most have reacted with indifference, about 49%. These consumers do not realize any big difference between traditional and green products. They can make purchases from instant influences, from the most convenient promotions offered to them, or they can only buy a few specific types of green products. However, they are not regular or loyal consumers. Meanwhile only 18% of participants are permanent buyers who have realized the benefits of using green products and are more sensitive to environmental problems.

Question 10: What green products do you buy and consume mainly?

This question is also an open question in order to understand which are the categories of green products that are bought mostly by the participants. And the answers are almost the same as the question asked about what types of products they knew.

Most of the participants responded that they try to buy only eco-friendly packaging, recyclable paper

or cardboard bags. Also most of them say that the 'green' products they buy the most are cosmetics, body and hair care. In fact it is normal that buying products like this, since health comes first and green products are tested that are healthier and with higher values. There also other answers given regarding food products, which are preferred bio and are considered as green products.

Question 11: Where do you make your purchases?

We see that the majority of 58% have online shopping as the most used method of buying green products. This is because they are easier to find, as physical points can be difficult to reach, or because many of the brands in our country operate online. It should also be mentioned that the pandemic situation has greatly influenced the behavior of consumers in terms of how they make purchases. In order to avoid contact with people consumers have been influenced and have begun to develop optional shopping methods, such as online shopping. 32% of the participants said that they still have more confidence to see and try the product in the physical points of green brand stores, as they are more suspicious and have a more protective behavior. While 10% of them trust their friends and their experience with these products, leaving it up to them to select and provide green products.

Question 12: What has influenced your purchases of green products mostly?

As for the reasons that influenced the participating consumers to buy green products, most of them, 37.5%, are influenced by the quality of these products. Thus, it seems that the participants of the questionnaire consider green products to be of better quality compared to others.

In addition, 18.8% of respondents indicate that the reason they choose these products is because of the benefits they receive from them, so green products are perceived by consumers to offer more benefits, both in terms of quality and in meeting the needs, demands and desires of buyers. Other reasons cited are the environment (12.5%) and ethical and social problems (10.4%), which shows that the participants are very interested in and concerned by environmental issues and consider the use of "green" products as an ethical

issue and the right choice for the benefit of all.

Question 13: What has influenced you not to buy environmentally friendly products or reduce their consumption?

Furthermore with this question I wanted to highlight the reasons that stay behind the decisions of participants for not buying green products. And most of the answers indicate the high price that comes with these products. 35.3% of the participants mention as the main reason for limiting the consumption of green products the high prices resulting from the high quality, which, as we analysed in the question above, is affirmed by the participants, and another reason mentioned mostly is the more difficult processes in the production in order not to harm the environment and meet the maximum expectations of consumers. It should also be noted that the age groups that participated in the study did not have high income levels, so they will be sensitive to the reasons of the economic costs of providing these products.

However, numerous responses also addressed the limited opportunities to find green products because it is difficult to obtain them or because they are not found on the main shelves. This important part of marketing damages knowledge about the products and does not make them visible to consumers, which directly affects their position in the minds of consumers and, consequently, information about them and their purchase.

Question 14: Do you think it is a moral obligation to buy environmentally friendly products?

The level of answers given to this question is quite optimistic and hopeful. This is because regardless of any reason why consumers do not buy these green products, the majority of participants, more precisely 86% of them, consider it a moral obligation to buy environmentally friendly products. So for this part of the participants the use of green products in addition to a benefit to their health is also a moral obligation for the well-being of the environment, placing the emphasis on long-term benefits, but very influential. Just as our families are made up of each member who has their own responsibilities, rights and obligations,

so society is made up of these families and beyond the whole environment is made up of all these societies.

So, in the same way that we accept our responsibilities in the family and feel the obligation to help them, so for the environment we have the moral obligation to protect and care for it by using environmentally friendly products, which ultimately, we, ourselves and our health will benefit.

A smaller part of 14% said that they do not consider it a moral obligation to use green products. They do not see this part as an obligation, just if they want to use this kind of products they do so and if they don't want to, then there is no problem, as it is not something obligatory for them.

Question 15: What is your attitude towards green products?

Regardless of the reasons, we had to understand what attitude participating consumers had towards green products, which affects the opportunities to obtain new information about them and consumer behavior towards them. And we see that the answers are quite positive. Most of them show that they have a positive attitude towards green products, which in addition to certain conditions also affects their positive behaviour towards these products, and in their future purchases. 24% have stated that they have a neutral attitude, so they are neither convinced in favor, nor convinced against the purchase and benefits of the products. Their behavior in most of the cases will follow the attitude participants have and if they hesitate in buying, in the first moment of lack of products on the shelves, they may decide to give up further purchases.

A small proportion, 3%, hold a negative and undesirable attitude towards these products

Question 16: Do you think green products have more quality and bring more benefits?

This question was asked to participants who have used both green products and traditional ones and can make a comparison with other products of the same category. The answers are very optimistic because from the analyses made, 89% of respondents that had used "green" products think that green products have more quality

and that they receive more benefits compared to other products. While 11% participants stated that they did not receive any more benefits or did not perceive more quality from the use of these products compared to others. Despite the fact that most of them were positive and their behavior will be in favor of further use of green products, different brands should be careful with the participants that do not perceive more quality, as they would not want this number of consumers to get increased, rather than decreased trying to meet their needs or desires.

Question 17: Do you know any brand in Albania that produces and sells green or ecological products?

We see that the majority of respondents, 76.4%, do not know a certain brand that produces and sells green and ecological products. Despite the fact that most were users of green products and preferred them, they choose only on the basis of the product and not on the brand name. Meanwhile only 23.6% have knowledge of specific brands in Albania not only for the products they produce and sell. The recognition in fact is low and leaves much to be desired, but brands need to do more to increase knowledge of them. As green product are new to the market they also need more marketing efforts in order to make them known for the benefits offered as well as the extra offers and possible improvements.

Question 18: If yes, mention 3 brands.

It was requested that those participants who knew Albanian brands that produce or sell green products, also mentioned 3 names of those brands they know.

The most mentioned brands by almost everyone were Ada Herbs, Yves Rocher and Green Food. There were also other mentioned brandes by a few participants like Memory Foam, Eco Marcet or Lufra. Ada Herbs and Yves Rocher are known in Albania as brands that produce and sell cosmetic products, hair or body treatment products, all classified as green products. Most of our participants who claimed to be familiar with Albanian green brands were women and therefore the names they gave fit the products they use.

However, there are a very small number of brands mentioned compared to those operating

in Albania, but they do not have an aggressive marketing development in order to gain positioned in the minds of consumers.

Question 19: What do you think about the marketing you get of green products and how much you are influenced?

This question was asked with the aim of relating the knowledge of the participants about green products and the influence of this knowledge on their behavior. From the answers of the participants in Albania, it appears that the marketing of these products still leaves much to be desired. Although they are new products related to natural and environmental phenomena and require more efforts for their promotion, brands do not seem to be very focused in this regard.

This initially has a negative impact on the information that consumers should receive and consequently on further consumer behavior towards these products. All participants complained about the lack of marketing and information disseminated by brands in Albania for the production and distribution of green products and expressed that they have a positive attitude towards the products that are heavily promoted and about which they are informed. Participants also indicated that they are highly influenced by the brands that have developed promotions, advertisements, announcements, or other types of marketing tools, which increases their knowledge, trust and purchase of products from these brands.

I also wanted to give an answer from a girl participant in the online questionnaire, as she had touched on some very key points: "Green products should be marketed as much as possible, at least to increase awareness that there is a better alternative for the environment and the individual, in order to reduce products produced not only unethically but also harmful. Another important thing is the transparency on social media about the product because the "green washing" effect often occurs where companies like H&M for example market the product as relatively environmentally friendly when in fact it is not. As I have tried and watched over from firms abroad, their presence on social media is key and also PR through influencers. Since these products sometimes require 2x marketing, this affects costs

along with other production/ packaging costs etc. I am personally first influenced by the aesthetics of the brand itself, if it attracts me I continue to get more information and buy the product and if it the brand does not attract me I just do not buy the product. In addition to aesthetics is the transparency and data provided on the product, ingredients, materials or other. “ This was the response of the girl whom I thank because she emphasized in a complete way what the other participants had said above.

Question 20: If you have any suggestions on the types, uses or green brands in Albania how they should operate or what to change please feel free to comment.

I thought there should be a free space for all participants who wish to freely express an opinion or give a suggestion. And some of the arguments of the participants are presented below: “In my opinion, they should focus on the quality of the product they offer, as a start they should be certified, registered and tested. They have to go through a few filters until they come to me as a customer. The marketing they use focuses on the service that makes me as a customer for what it offers and then mentions as a strong point the fact that they are ecological and not to be primary.”

As a consumer, I first want to fulfill my needs and then the environments’, so I can not buy something that does not fully serve me or that I find the product better at the same price simply because it is ecological. I think if they want to consider being ecological they should make a lot of tests to bring out the best and combining quality with the materials used. I hope that all those who love the environment take really concrete steps, well thought and studied a lot before launching the product at the market. The brands should not rely on a global idea (which is ecological) because society is very individualistic (it wants the best for itself) “

“Green brands are still negligible for us. Vodafone is trying and has objectives that are conform to the actions and conduct of business in the most eco friendly way. When it comes to consumer brands whether clothing or food, there are small businesses which are “really” green brands but still unknown due to lack of marketing. Price is a very influential factor to push the customer to buy

from a brand and unfortunately these products have high costs. We as a people are not yet aware, but the younger generation must research and increase knowledge in this regard. “

“In Albania, green products have started to be introduced and marketed, but not enough, there should be an awareness through the marketing of these products on social media mostly, by influencers such as bloggers or public celebrities or other forms of marketing that promote consumer purchasing.”

These were some of the opinions and suggestions of the respondents and also there were many opinions that in Albania green products are not branded and therefore that is why there is a small number of consumers who buy them, but that if the awareness about these products would increase, the impact on consumers and their purchases would also increase.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Over 70% of participants showed positive attitudes towards green products and have created the belief that these products have a higher level of quality than traditional products. The purchase of these products has been mostly influenced by the high quality as well as the benefits that consumers receive from their use. The green products most used by the participants were: cosmetic products, food and ecological packaging.

A very important conclusion is that Albanian brands that produce and sell green products do not make much marketing efforts to increase awareness about them and all participating consumers complained about this. In Albania it is very difficult to find and always have green products available, as there is a lack of access to exposure and increased publicity for them. Despite all the knowledge, positive attitudes and information about the benefits and high quality of green products, consumer behavior does not always follow consumer attitude. For various reasons most participating consumers do not make large purchases of these products. Some of the reasons identified were: high price, difficulty to find them within stores, being already familiar and comfortable with the use of traditional products, skepticism about the production of

these products etc.

That being the case from the study conducted on green products and consumer behaviour we came to the conclusion that despite the great knowledge of Albanian consumers on consumption and ecological labels, most of them still prefer to buy traditional products, or are indifferent to both types of products, without eventually having a high preference for the green ones.

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