

Research on the Impact of Consumers' Identity Salience on Green Consumption Intention

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Abstract

In the context of green consumption, consumers face the dilemma of balancing self and others' interests. To address this issue, this study introduces a social identity perspective and constructs a theoretical framework in which individual and social identity affect green consumption intentions through altruism and subjective norms. Through online experiments, data was collected and empirically analyzed. The results show when consumers' individual identity is emphasized, their altruism and subjective norms are weakened, leading to a decrease in their green consumption intentions. Conversely, when consumers' social identity is emphasized, their altruism and subjective norms are strengthened, leading to an increase in their green consumption intentions. The conclusion indicates consumers possess both individual and social identities. Compared to individual identity, the salience of social identity will lead consumers to more broadly self-represent, pay more attention to the expectations and interests of others and social groups, and strengthen their willingness to engage in green consumption. This study provides decision-making basis for businesses in the design of green product information, advertising, and promotional strategies.

Keywords

Green Consumption, Identity Salience, Altruistic Tendency, Subjective Norms, Social Identity

1. Introduction

In recent years, the deterioration of natural conditions, resource scarcity, and environmental pollution that humanity has faced have intensified, making the issue of green consumption increasingly a concern for all sectors of society. The impact of consumption on resources, the environment and CO₂ emissions is

becoming increasingly apparent. At present, more than one-third of all environmental problems are caused by consumption activities (Ren & Cai, 2020). Consumer behavior patterns are having an unprecedented impact on our natural environment, and an important way to solve environmental problems is to encourage consumers to actively practice green consumption behaviors. Therefore, it is particularly important to have an in-depth understanding of the internal laws and influencing mechanisms of consumers' green consumption behaviors.

This research field is still faced with the challenge of the important issue of self-other trade-off, that is, consumers often believe that green products tend to have non-green attribute defects such as higher prices and worse product quality, and consumers need to bear their own additional efforts and costs, such as spending extra energy, money, and cognitive costs, and the environmental benefits brought by them are beneficial to others and social groups, with perceived externalities. One of the effective ways to solve the problem of balancing the interests of self and others in the context of green consumption is to activate consumers' broader and more transcendent selves (White et al., 2019). The perception of environmental solutions and benefits generated by "I" or "we" is clearly different. Therefore, this study introduces the concept of identity salience, in which consumers' personal identity salience temporarily acts as a distinct individual, while social identity salience makes them temporarily act as a member of a social group (Rahmani, Haasova, Czellar et al., 2022). Previous studies have focused on consumer self-identity across time and context, such as independent and dependent self construction, collective self, and individual self. However, the perspective of identity significance suggests that consumers possess both individual and social identities, and have strong situational dependence. So, in the context of green consumption, existing research still provides in-depth and comprehensive answers on how the different identities of consumers have an impact on their willingness to consume green.

Based on this, this study aims to answer the following questions and make corresponding theoretical contributions. First, the salience of individual identity and social identity is taken as the starting point to answer the differences in consumers' psychological and behavioral intentions for green consumption under different conditions of salient identity, and what are the differences between green consumption decisions from the perspectives of "I" and "we". Second, the construction and examination of the mediating mechanism of individual identity and social identity acting on green consumption willingness through altruistic tendencies and subjective norms provides a new idea for solving the problem of trade-offs between self and others.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Green Consumption

Green consumption behavior can be defined as the consumption behavior of consumers who strive to protect the ecological environment and minimize the

negative impact of consumption on the environment in the process of purchasing, using, and post-processing goods (An, 2022). Green consumption behavior can be understood as a resource-saving and environment-friendly consumption that has long-term benefits to others, society, and even humans and the environment (Zhang et al., 2017). It can be seen that green consumption behavior is an altruistic and pro-social environmental protection behavior with less individual interests, which requires members of society to follow social norms, and environmental benefits are shared by members of society. Different from traditional consumption behaviors, the definition of green consumption tends to be altruistic, cooperative, pro-social, and conforming to social norms as specific internal mechanisms. This study proposes that green consumption refers to a kind of resource-saving and environment-friendly consumption, which has direct and indirect long-term benefits to enterprises, society, the environment and even human beings, which can be reflected in the brand, concept and culture of enterprises is a relative and theoretical concept.

2.2. Individual Identity, Social Identity Salience and Green Consumption Intention

Human behavior can be seen as a continuum, with one end being interpersonal behavior, where people act as individuals, and the other end being intergroup behavior, where people act as members of a group. Individual identity refers to the way people perceive themselves as individuals, including their own characteristics, values, and goals (Oyserman et al., 2009). In contrast, social identity is defined as “the part of an individual’s broad self-concept, which includes both the individual’s perception of his or her identity as a social group or the evaluative and emotional implications attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978). The salience of personal identity refers to the fact that people temporarily see themselves as individuals, while the salience of social identity refers to the fact that people see themselves as part of a group.

Identity-based theories of motivation tend to make judgments and behaviors based on values consistent with their salient identities. The salience of individual identity will motivate consumers to act according to individual goals, that is, consumers will consider more of their cognitive resources, time and money costs, and income at the individual level in the decision-making process of green consumption. When social identity is salient, people tend to behave in a way that is beneficial to the members of the group, which may lead to altruistic, cooperative, and group behaviors. Assigning people to a simple, nonsensical category is sufficient to produce group-oriented perceptions and behaviors (Zhang, & Zuo, 2006), suggesting that no matter what social identity the consumer initiates, it will prompt the consumer to intuit and behave from the perspective of “we”.

Therefore, this study speculates that in the green consumption context, when individual identity is salient, consumers perceive and act with “I” as the identity framework, and consumers’ cognitive and emotional tendencies are often associated with personal goals. When social identity is prominent, perceiving and

acting in a framework of “we” rather than “I” will promote consumers to be group-oriented, and consumers’ cognition is associated with the norms and goals of the group. Based on the above discussion, hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2 are proposed.

H1.The salience of social identity will enhance consumers’ green consumption intention;

H2.The salience of personal identity will weaken consumers’ green consumption intention.

2.3. The Mediating Role of Altruistic Tendency

The concept of consumer altruism originates from social psychology, and in green consumption, it is increasingly receiving attention from scholars. Altruistic tendency refers to the behavior of an individual who cares about the interests of others without considering his own interests, and it is a behavior that consciously and voluntarily benefits others (Ni & Lao, 2020). The altruistic tendency of consumers is to act for the benefit of others without expecting any return. According to the theory of social value orientation, altruistic tendency can be defined as “not caring about personal gain, but only wanting to maximize the benefit of others” (Papista & Krystallis, 2013). Based on this, this study argues that consumers’ altruistic tendency is a concept of caring for the well-being, health, and interests of others, and will make a series of behaviors that meet social expectations and norms, and consider the economic interests and environmental benefits of others.

When consumers’ social identity is salient, they tend to perceive and act within the framework of group orientation, and are more likely to pay attention to the interests of their surrounding members, and their altruistic tendency is stronger. On the contrary, when consumers’ individual identity is prominent, they tend to pay more attention to their personal interests and costs, so the altruistic tendency is weaker. Consumers with higher altruistic tendencies are more cautious about the ecological benefits of their actions and are more environmentally conscious. Altruism has also been found to be positively correlated with customer perceived value (Hardeman et al., 2002). The higher the altruistic tendency of consumers, the higher their perception of their own environmental responsibility, and the stronger their willingness to buy green products. Based on this, hypothesis 3 is proposed.

H3.Altruistic tendency plays a mediating role in the impact of consumers’ identity salience on green consumption intention.

H3a.When social identity is salient, consumers’ altruistic tendency is strengthened, which in turn promotes their green consumption intention.

H3b.When individual identity is salient, consumers’ altruistic tendency weakens, which in turn reduces their green consumption intention.

2.4. The Mediating Role of Subjective Norm

Subjective norm can be defined as the perceived social pressure from other

people or groups, which arises from the role of the group or salient others on individual decision-making (Cialdini et al., 2006). Subjective norms are also understood as individuals distinguishing and judging social rules. For example, if a consumer's community or friends around him encourage green consumption, he may feel potential pressure to comply with external rules. Subjective norms reflect the degree of confidence that a consumer's important reference object has in a particular consumer behavior. Subjective norms of consumers not only come from the expectations and requirements of others and society, but also from their self-regulation and moral constraints on individuals. In view of this, this study defines subjective norms as the pressure that consumers perceive as self-moral constraints and social and group expectations as a result of complying with or not following a particular rule.

In the context of green consumption, subjective norms are a cognitive representation of consumers, which not only characterizes consumers' internal self-norms and guidelines, but also describes and prescribes the behavioral models of members of our group. When the consumer's personal identity is salient, the consumer only makes decisions based on the individual's norms and beliefs, that is, the subjective perception of personal responsibilities and obligations from the perspective of the individual, at this time, the subjective norms will be very limited, and the consumer's green consumption intention will be reduced; When consumers' social identity is salient, consumers tend to pay attention to the shared thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns of their group, and act according to the normative information conveyed by other members. Based on this, hypothesis 4 is proposed.

H4. Subjective norms play a mediating role in the impact of consumer identity salience on green consumption intention.

H4a. When consumers' social identity is salient, consumers' perceived subjective norms are enhanced, which in turn promotes their green consumption intention.

H4b. When consumers' individual identities are salient, consumers' perceived subjective norms are weakened, which in turn reduces their green consumption intention.

Based on the above research hypothesis, **Figure 1** presents the theoretical model.

3. Study 1: Identity Manipulation Check

3.1. Design and Procedure

The purpose of the study is to manipulate the identity salience and check it. In this experiment, graphic materials related to the corresponding identity are used to highlight the manipulation of individual and social identities, and semi-open-ended self-answers are used to test the effectiveness of the manipulation.

Specifically, Participants will be randomly assigned to either of the social identity salient group, the personal identity salient group, or the control group.

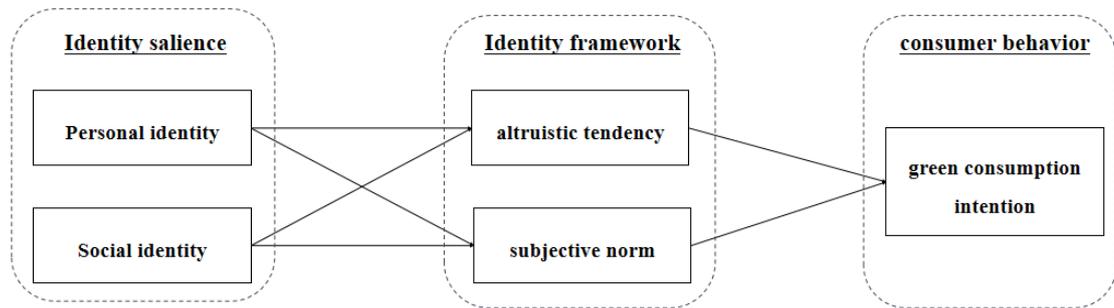


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

First of all, the participants in the experimental group were informed that their community was carrying out an environmental protection program, including the procurement of green products, the use of green products, and the recycling and disposal of green products. Next, they need to browse ads about the environmental program. Among them, the graphic materials of the social identity group are titled “Build Green Consumption Together, Share a Better Life”, and the text uses “we” as the subject of behavior, for example, “join your community and practice green consumption with your friends around you”, and the subject of green consumption is “you and your friends and family around you”. The personal identity group emphasizes personal identity, for example, “you are helping to protect the environment”, “you can make a difference”. The subjects in the control group did not do any neutral treatment and went directly to the next link. Finally, participants were asked how they saw themselves to make a statement.

3.2. Data analysis and Results

Two laboratory assistants who were blinded to the research hypothesis and experimental conditions coded the respondents’ self-statement text, such as self-descriptions mentioning personal qualities, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors were coded as –1 points; Self-descriptions involving population classification and social groups, as well as affective tendencies and cognitive evaluations of the group, are coded as a score of 1. In the end, 90 participants were recruited on the Credamo platform and randomly assigned to three groups using a one-way between-participant experiment. The results of the non-parametric t-test showed that the social identity group ($M = 0.93$, $SD = 0.30$) had more participants mentioning affiliation and describing their emotions and cognition than the control group ($M = -0.21$, $SD = 0.09$), and the individual identity group ($M = -1.07$, $SD = 0.31$) compared with the control group ($M = -0.21$, $SD = 0.09$) more participants mentioned their personal traits ($Z(60) = -2.87$, $p < 0.05$). The results show that the salience manipulation of identity is effective.

4. Study2: Green Consumption Decisions Study

4.1. Design and Procedure

The experiment was conducted using a single-factor three-group experimental

design. By asking the participants whether they have heard of or purchased green products, they can ensure that the participants entering the experiment have a certain degree of familiarity with green products. A total of 340 participants were recruited online and offline and randomly assigned to two groups. Among them, 6 people did not complete the manipulation of identity salience, and finally retained a total of 334 participants. Among them, 115 were in the social identity group, 114 were in the personal identity group, and 105 were in the control group.

The first part of the experimental questionnaire is the manipulation of individual identity and social identity salience. First, participants are randomly placed in any group. Participants are then told that they are participating in an environmental initiative in their community and read about the specific materials. The second part is the measurement of green consumption intentions, and we use the willingness to participate proposed by White et al. (2011) as the main dependent variable, e.g. "I may participate in this community environmental protection program". The third part is the measurement of altruistic tendencies and subjective norms. Among them, the consumer's altruistic tendency refers to the Carlo & Randall (2002) scale, with a total of three items, and the subjective norm refers to the Chaudhary & Bisai (2018) scale, with a total of three items, all of which are scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). And to avoid the priming effect, i.e., the question posed earlier may directly imply how the participant responds to the later question, the mediating variable is tested after the dependent variable. The fourth part is demographic related issues, mainly including gender, age, education, etc. At the end of the experiment, cash rewards will be given to the participants.

4.2. Data Analysis and Results

Firstly, the impact of individual identity and social identity on green consumption is examined. The independent sample t-test was carried out with individual identity salience and social identity salience as independent variables and green consumption intention as dependent variables. Specifically, the results of independent samples t-test showed that the green consumption willingness of the social identity group ($n = 115$) ($M = 6.47$, $SD = 0.41$) was saliently higher than that of the control group ($n = 105$) ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(220) = 4.38$, $p < 0.001$, and the green consumption willingness of the individual identity group ($n = 114$) ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 0.29$) was saliently lower than that of the control group ($n = 105$), $t(219) = 3.27$, $p < 0.001$. The results show that social identity saliently enhances consumers' green consumption intention, while individual identity saliently weakens consumers' green consumption intention. So let's say H1 and H2 are supported.

Then, the mediating role of altruistic tendency and subjective norm in the process of salient individual identity and social identity in the process of green consumption intention was examined. For the test of mediating effect, the Boot-

strap mediating effect test method with the independent variable as the categorical variable was used, and the PROCESS program in SPSS21.0 software was used to select model 4 and perform 5000 samples with 95% confidence intervals. Two dummy variables ($X1 = 1$ for “social identity group” and $X2 = 1$ for “individual identity group”) were created, with altruistic tendency as the mediating variable M1 and subjective norm as the mediating variable M2. The results of the analysis of specific mediating effects are as follows:

Taking the control group as a reference, in the comparison between the control group and the social identity group ($X1$), the mediating of altruistic tendency was positive and salient ($\beta = 0.402$, 95% CI = [0.102, 0.167]), the mediating of subjective norms was positive and salient ($\beta = 0.431$, 95% CI = [0.035, 0.469]), the 95% confidence interval did not include 0, and the direct effect of social identity on green consumption intention was 0, corresponding to 95% CI = [-0.078, 0.067], indicating that the direct effect was no longer salient. In the comparison between the control group and individual identity ($X2$), the mediating effect of altruistic tendency was negative and salient ($\beta = -0.347$, 95% CI = [0.124, 0.173]), the mediating effect of subjective norms was negative and salient ($\beta = -0.423$, 95% CI = [0.041, 0.138]), the 95% confidence interval did not include 0, and after adding the mediating variable, the direct effect of chronological identity on green consumption intention was 0, corresponding to 95% CI = [-0.087, 0.074], indicating that the direct effect was no longer salient. See **Table 1** for details. The results indicate that H3 and H4 have been validated.

5. Conclusion

5.1. General Discussion

Firstly, this study introduces the social identity method into the research field of

Table 1. The results of the mediating effect test.

Mediation Path Effect	Estimated Value	95% CI	
		Low	High
Employing the control group as a reference:			
Individual Identity → Altruistic Tendency → Green Consumption Intention	-0.347 ^a	0.124	0.173
Individual Identity → Subjective Norm → Green Consumption Intention	-0.423 ^a	0.041	0.138
Individual Identity → Green Consumption Intention	0.006	-0.087	0.074
Social Identity → Altruistic Tendency → Green Consumption Intention	0.402 ^a	0.102	0.167
Social Identity → Subjective Norm → Green Consumption Intention	0.431 ^a	0.035	0.469
Social Identity → Green Consumption Intention	-0.003	-0.087	0.074

a. The significant mediation effect is denoted by “a”.

green consumption, breaking through the previous shortcomings of only focusing on self-identity of consumers across time and scenarios. Based on the perspective of identity significance, a theoretical framework is constructed on how the instantaneous initiation of individual and social identities affects their willingness to green consumption in the context of green consumption. It answers and explains the psychological processes and behavioral intentions of consumers as individual and collective actors in the context of green consumption.

Secondly, this study deeply analyzes the impact mechanism of individual and social identity significance on green consumption willingness in the context of green consumption, constructs a theoretical model with altruistic tendencies and subjective norms as mediating variables, analyzes its mediating transmission mechanism and its effect, provides new ideas for solving the problem of balancing the advantages and disadvantages of self and others, and also provides a theoretical basis for related research on emotional and cognitive factors in green consumption.

Thirdly, this study distinguishes the differences in consumer perception of green consumption from the perspectives of “me” and “us”. Compared to personal identity, the significance of social identity allows consumers to more broadly self characterize, pay more attention to the expectations and demands of others and social groups, and include others and collectives from a wider distance and time range in their self definition, thus being more inclined to engage in green consumption that is essentially altruistic behavior.

5.2. Managerial Implications

This study provides certain insights for marketing personnel of green brands in product development, design, advertising and promotion strategies. Firstly, in the development, design, and advertising of green products, social identity clues with high accessibility that match consumer identity are added to product information to awaken consumer social identity recognition, thereby increasing consumer willingness to consume green. Secondly, whether it is individual identity or social identity, marketers need to pay extra attention to whether consumers have a positive attitude towards the identity itself after its activation, and should pay more attention to the identity that has a positive connection with product information. Thirdly, for marketers, identifying and understanding consumer identity cues and their specific connections in green consumption, and developing products related to these naturally occurring cues are crucial.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Firstly, in terms of research methodology, this study mainly collected data through questionnaires, all of which were collected at the same time point. Future research can collect data by setting different time periods and conducting on-site experiments. Additionally, implicit attitude measurement can be used to measure consumers' true attitudes and intentions, reducing the formation of at-

titude behavior gaps. Secondly, in terms of research content, there are still many general social identities, such as various social groups, national ethnicity, occupation, gender, etc. Future research can further explore other types of social identities. Finally, in the future, we can continue to examine whether the effects discovered in this article will continue to exist if more specific purchasing scenarios and personal characteristics are used as research contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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