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## Individual Strategies for Sustainable Consumption

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## **Individual Strategies for Sustainable Consumption**

### **Abstract**

Consumers have a key role to play in meeting governments' targets for reduced energy consumption, more sustainable waste management practices and lifestyles with fewer environmental consequences. We discuss some of the assumptions underpinning academic debates about sustainable consumption and describe a research design which has helped us move beyond some of the less helpful conventions. We interviewed consumers in order to obtain a detailed understanding of several of their recent (non)purchase processes. We identified three groups who have distinct strategies for greening their lifestyles: Translators, Exceptors and Selectors. We illustrate these groups using empirical data. This detailed understanding of how individuals approach the problem of greening not only provides new insight into how the problem of consumption may be approached in conceptual and practical terms, but also explains some of the difficulties encountered by previous research. We revisit the literature to examine the challenges that this typology offers extant ways of thinking about 'the green consumer'. We identify ways in which we might influence the groups in our typology through marketing strategies and policy initiatives.

**Keywords: sustainable consumption; green consumer; ethical consumer; greening; semi-structured interviews**

## Introduction

There are many approaches that governments and industry can take to reducing environmental degradation. However, one of the most difficult issues to address is how to change the day-to-day behaviour of individuals. Peattie (2001, p. 197) notes that, 'the consumption undertaken by private households accounts for a large proportion of the economy's environmental impact' and some estimate that this proportion could be as high as 30-40% (Grunert 1993). Although governments, NGOs, academics and marketers are agreed that more people need to engage in a higher number of environmental activities (DEFRA 2010; Dupré et al 2005; Jackson 2009; United States Environmental Protection Agency 2010), research has failed to find straightforward ways to achieve this. More than 30 years ago researchers began to address this problem by trying to identify the green consumer. Identification of groups of consumers who act in similar ways to each other is a cornerstone of marketing theory and practice (Piercy and Morgan 1993), although it is not uncontested (Firat and Schultz 1997). Segmentation of the public into well-defined groups whose behaviour or concerns can be predicted gives marketers and policy makers a basis on which to design interventions. However there is considerable evidence that both identification and intervention strategies have failed to bring about the significant changes desired by green marketers and policy makers. In this paper we will argue that by taking a grounded, qualitative research approach we have found that, rather than demonstrating that one way of describing green consumers is better than all the others, what we need is a more complex conceptualisation of individuals working towards more sustainable consumption that combines many of the existing lines of enquiry and leads to a richer picture of the green consumer.

In the discussion that follows, we examine ideas from several social science literatures pertaining to individual responses to sustainable consumption. We begin our discussion by noting that individuals engaging in sustainable consumption behaviours are labelled using different terms depending on the norms of the literature of which the study is a part. For example, within the sustainable development literature, it is quite normal to refer to ‘ethical consumers’ and for this to mean consumers who prefer products or services which do least damage to the environment as well as those which support forms of social justice (Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005). In the marketing literature, however these same consumers would be termed ‘green consumers’, although this label would also carry an assumption that this description would include consumers who were interested in ethical issues such as fair trade (Solomon, Bamossy and Askegaard 1999). In other words, although these discourses use different terms to signify individuals who embrace the ideals of sustainable consumption, we take these terms here to have the same broad meanings. For consumers who consistently do not engage with or have no interest in such issues, we use the term ‘grey’ consumers (Peattie 2001; Wagner 1997).

### **Green consumers: assumptions underpinning segmentation approaches**

#### *Green is black and white*

Previous research has tried to classify green and grey consumers as two separate groups of people. In the social psychology literature, for example, the notion of voluntary simplifiers has been used to distinguish between people who choose to reduce their ‘expenditures on consumer goods and services, and to cultivate non-materialistic sources of satisfaction and meaning’ (Etzioni 1998, p. 620) and non-voluntary simplifiers, who do not (Shaw and Newholm 2002). In the recycling literature, a similar dichotomy has been set up. Many researchers have sought to categorise people as recyclers and non-recyclers (De Young 1989; McDonald and Oates 2003).

There is also a significant amount of work in the marketing literature which characterises consumers as either grey or green (Wagner 1997). Each of these strands of literature conceptualises these categories as mutually exclusive, black and white (even good and bad) and to a large extent homogenous. Even where researchers complexify this work by characterising multiple groups within the population (see below for further discussion of typologies) the individuals within these groups are discussed as if they are broadly similar. This is a quantitative research convention, but it does raise issues about how we currently conceptualise and research the problem of sustainable consumption.

### *Green can be segmented*

In both the marketing and recycling fields, the process of trying to populate these categories began by attempts to label them according to their demographic, socioeconomic or psychographic characteristics. More sophisticated work tries to combine a wide variety of these factors in order to build up a picture of the green or ethical consumer (see for example, Tiltman 2007). This is an attractive strategy for both marketers and policy makers for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is in line with many of the research norms around the promotion of goods and services. Secondly, these data (particularly demographics and socioeconomic indicators) are easily obtained. Thirdly, if, for example, recyclers can be shown to be female, or better educated, this information would lend itself to clearer promotions strategies which targeted specific segments of the population. However this segmentation approach did not produce clear evidence which allowed researchers to identify these groups consistently or reliably in practice (Peattie 2001; Roberts 1996; Straughan and Roberts 1999; Teisl, Rubin and Noblet 2008; Van Liere and

Dunlap 1980; Wagner, 1997). There is resonance here with wider critiques of segmentation within the marketing literature (Firat and Schultz 1997).

### *Green can be typed*

Another approach to investigating the problem of identifying green consumers is to type them. Here we distinguish between what we are calling 'segmentation' which involves dividing the population (or in some cases, just green consumers) into groups according to characteristics which can be determined relatively objectively (such as age, gender, income, housing type, level of education) whereas what we are calling a typology means that groups are distinguished from each other using more subjective notions such as reported behaviour, intentions and values. This is an important distinction because it means that the categories are no longer conceptually simple. Although these more complex ideas might help researchers understand the green consumer better, these insights will mean that they are harder to reach using traditional promotional tools and approaches. The development of typologies can be done statistically (e.g. Gilg, Barr and Ford 2005) or through more qualitative methods (e.g. Moisander 2001 cited in Autio, Heiskanen and Heinonen 2009).

The problems associated with the simple, either/or categories discussed above led some commentators to develop new, intermediate categories of green consumer, such as 'light' versus 'dark' green or 'shallow' versus 'deep' green or 'green' versus 'Green' (Dermody 1999). Depending on how the membership of these intermediate groups is determined, these could be considered to be either more complex segmentation, or simple typology approaches.



A wide range of bases for discriminating between different groups of green or ethical consumers can be found in the literature and comprise two main types; Behavioural and attitudinal. Some concepts, such as whether or not people act on their beliefs, offer bases for discriminating between groups that have both a behavioural and an attitudinal element. We will consider each of these ways of discriminating between groups of consumers in turn in the following section, using studies drawn from across the social sciences for the purpose of illustration.

#### *Grouping individuals using behavioural constructs*

The behavioural groupings consider issues such as the kinds of activities, amount of activities, and consistency of activities that are reported. These are considered here, rather than in the discussion about objective segmentation approaches above because these studies rely on reported or hypothetical behaviour and so are considered to be subjective. In their study of 1600 households in Devon, UK, Gilg, Barr and Ford (2005) found that people could be categorised by a combination of two behavioural considerations: the kinds of activities that they undertook and how often (or consistently, see below) they performed these activities. Other studies centre on how often people undertake the same activity (Chan 1999; Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu and Shaw 2006), how consistently they behave (Neilssen and Scheepers 1992; Peattie 2001) or whether they undertake a few (different) activities or carry out a wide range of green or ethical activities (McDonald and Oates 2006). Studies that assess a range of different kinds of activities or look at use and disposal as well as point of purchase offer a richer picture of green or ethical consumption than single issue studies on the purchase of fair trade items, or recycling behaviour, for example, would allow. There is a tendency with much of the work related to examining behaviour to rely on self-reports.

### *Grouping individuals using attitudinal constructs*

The attitudinal bases for distinction include intentions, motivations and beliefs or values. This category includes research that explores attitudes to social issues more generally as well as research beliefs about specific green products or activities (Gold and Rubik 2009).

There is a group of researchers concerned with distinguishing between consumers who feel that they can make a difference through their consumption choices (Peattie 1999; The Roper Organization 1992; Straughan and Roberts 1999). There is also a number of studies that have sought to implement the ideas of Rokeach (1973), Kahle (1983) and Schwartz (1992), about consumer values in the arena of green or ethical consumption (see for example, Thørgersen and Ölander 2003).

Researchers have also characterised individuals in terms of their intentions. Intentions towards sustainable consumption have been dealt with in these social science literatures in two main ways: They have been used as a proxy for action; and they have been examined in their own right. The studies which have used intentions as a proxy for actions include the many contributions to the marketing literature which, for example, asked consumers whether they would be prepared to pay a premium for green goods and services (Prothero 1990; Rowlands, Scott and Parker 2003) or take part in recycling schemes (Hopper and Nielsen 1991).

Researchers were initially heartened by the overwhelmingly positive response to questions of this sort and on the basis of this kind of work they predicted a rise in various aspects of greener consumption (Davis 1993; Elgin and Mitchell 1976; Lawrence 1993; Shama 1985) which did not ultimately come to pass (Maniates 2002) underlining the fact that although many aspects of

sustainable consumption are endorsed by the general public, these attitudes will not necessarily translate into actions. In order to overcome the shortcomings of this methodological reliance on hypothetical behaviour (Rutherford 1998), some researchers began to move their focus towards measuring concrete actions rather than reported or imagined future scenarios (Murphy 2006; Tucker 1999). Although this represents a positive step, researching actual sustainable consumption behaviours (or non-behaviours), as we shall see later from the findings discussed here, may still not be enough.

There is another strand of literature centred on intentions that uses intentions as a basis for distinguishing between different kinds of consumer and is perhaps of greater relevance. Here rather than counting intentions to buy or not to buy green products or services, studies have sought to examine and classify different kinds of intentions; for example, McDonald et al's, (2006) work on Beginner Voluntary Simplifiers or Kuijlen and van Raaij's (1979) classification of recyclers who are distinguished by their motivations.

#### *Single and multiple bases for distinguishing groups*

Typologies may employ single or multiple bases for distinguishing between their consumer groups. The Ozcaglar-Toulouse, Shiu and Shaw (2006) study of fair trade purchasing, or the Kuijlen and van Raaij (1979) typology of recycler motivations are both examples of studies which have employed a single dimension typology to group individuals. A famous example of a more complex typology from the marketing literature is the work undertaken by The Roper Organization (1992) into green consumers. This work, which has been widely adopted and in some cases, adapted by others (e.g. Ottman 1993) seeks to distinguish between five different

kinds of green consumer, ranging from those who believe that individuals cannot make a difference (basic browns) through to actively green consumers (true blue greens). One of the most interesting things about this typology is that it blends behavioural and attitudinal elements, not only because it distinguishes between those who take action by making changes to their habits and routines (true blue greens) differently to those who support their environmentalist beliefs by spending money (greenback greens), but also because it distinguishes between those who act upon their beliefs and those who do not. In fact the most complex typologies, often employing a range of behavioural and attitudinal constructs to distinguish between groups, tend to be found in market research rather than the academic literature. See for example, Simmons Market Research Bureau (1991), Tiltman (2007), Rose, Dade and Scott (2007) and Ferraro (2009) for interesting typologies developed or applied by marketers. One of the major drawbacks of this kind of work is that although it is potentially very powerful, commercial sensitivities sometimes deter the authors from sharing their methodologies, making it hard to determine how groups were arrived at in the first place and limiting their adoption by academic researchers.

*Green is all of these things; and none of them*

The work on typologies is useful for identifying green consumers because it represents a move in the literature away from characterising green or ethical consumers as a homogenous group with uniform intentions. It has the potential to complexify our view of people working towards sustainable consumption. In fact there is merit in each of these types of endeavour and rather than arguing that one of these segmentation or typology approaches is better than the others, it might be that each of these ways of approaching the problem of identifying the green consumer

needs to be layered together in order to present a richer, more realistic and useful picture of sustainable consumption.

However, because the unit of analysis commonly used in studies of recycling or green purchases is the individual, this view of the green or ethical consumption still implicitly represents people as taking rational (Newholm and Shaw 2007) coherent, deliberate positions through their consumption. Although this assumption is perhaps as natural as it is convenient, it should not go unexamined. It has been challenged by Peattie (1999) who depicts consumers as making a series of purchase decisions which are very much dependent on the context in which they are made and which are not necessarily related to each other or underpinned by a driving philosophy of consumption. This view suggests that it is not the individual that should be examined, but each act of consumption.

As well as focusing on the individual, much of the literature treats green or ethical purchases, recycling activities and other decisions as if they were made by the individual examined, ahistorically and without reference to others. On this issue, Burgess et al (2003, p. 269) note that, ‘...a tradition of environmental attitude-behaviour research, the primary focus has been the individual consumer...disassociated from their everyday lives. The challenge is to re-contextualise individuals...’. At the very least, we need to consider individuals as part of the immediate households and extended networks to which they belong and through which they negotiate their daily patterns of consumption and examine each act or decision as part of an on-going pattern of such acts and decisions.

In the marketing and recycling literatures we have also been guilty of studying ‘moments’ in a product’s or service’s lifecycle, treating co-production, purchase, use and disposal not just with separate studies, but studies embedded in different literatures. Many studies also examine single acts of purchase (e.g. fair trade coffee) or disposal (e.g. paper recycling) out of context of other purchase or disposal behaviour (Thørgersen and Ölander 2003). There are a few examples, such as Dehab, Gentry and Su (1995) in the recycling literature, of studies that employ a more holistic view of the elements of consumption that they examine, and it is this, broad, situated conceptualisation of the purchase act that we employ in this study.

To summarise, rather than conceptualising consumers as a series of individuals making a single purchase, in this study we have researched them as individuals who make multiple (possibly inconsistent) purchase, use and disposal decisions as part of a household, within the context of a wide range of influences such as social norms, industry structures and policy and regulatory frameworks and in relation to other purchase, use and disposal decisions.

These insights have been the starting point for the enquiry which is described below. Through extended empirical work we have discovered that most consumers can be viewed as suspended in some kind of tension between grey and green purchasing. We see this position as an inevitable result of the trade-offs between green and ethical criteria and other, more conventional, issues such as price and availability. As well as competing with grey criteria, however, green and ethical factors are often incompatible with each other, meaning that as part of sustainable consumption local outlets may have to be traded off against organic credentials, or food miles against fair trade. In this study we have sought to understand the problematic of sustainable

consumption more broadly by examining consumer decision making in context and, to some extent, over time, and product lifecycles in great detail. In the next part of the paper, we will describe our methodological approach. We will then present one of our most significant findings: a typology of approaches to sustainable consumption. Following a detailed discussion of each of the three approaches in our typology, we will revisit the literature set out above, showing how the ideas represented by this typology challenge and extend extant theory.

### **Methods**

The results discussed here are part of a wider study of green consumer behaviour. The typology presented in the following section was surfaced through the analysis of data from 81 semi-structured interviews with consumers who had some green or ethical aspect to their consumption. These ideas were further refined through three focus groups, which involved an additional 11 consumers. Following the qualitative rationale of the study, participants were selected through a process of purposive sampling. Initial participants were recruited through green and ethical networks in the UK, leaflets in green outlets and adverts in green or ethical publications. The remainder of the participants was recruited through a process of snowballing outwards from the initial sample (Patton 1990). The participants in this study have therefore identified themselves, to some extent, as green or ethical consumers.

The interviews themselves concentrated on recent purchases of technology-based products, such as small electrical goods (e.g. TVs, DVD players, cameras, stereos and computers) or white goods (fridges, freezers, cookers, washing machines, clothes dryers and dishwashers) and regular shopping for food and household products. We began each interview by asking participants to recall a list of their most recent purchases of technology-based products from the categories

above. If (and only if) they struggled to think of an example from the past five years, we offered prompts about the product groups discussed. Where individuals had gone through a research and evaluation process but ultimately decided not to purchase a product in one of these groups, this was also eligible for inclusion in the next stage of the interview. From the list that was developed we asked them to concentrate on the largest recent purchase and tell us about this process from the first decision to consider the purchase right through to post purchase in as much detail as they could. The emphasis on actual, recent purchases allowed us to avoid the pitfalls of considering hypothetical, idealised or intended behaviour, as discussed above. The interview protocol<sup>1</sup> was designed to help the participants articulate their purchase experiences in as much detail as possible, including any research undertaken, the purchase itself and the context for the purchase. Each interview discussed the purchase (or decision not to purchase) of one or more technology-based products as well as their grocery shopping. Although our data gathering strategy centres on purchase (or non-purchase) decisions we have sought to include discussions of how issues relating to the production, use and disposal of products are used to inform the decision making process in order to introduce a consideration of the whole product lifecycle into our data.

In this way we built up a data set which contains detailed, ‘thick’ descriptions (Blaikie 2000) of over 130 technology-based product purchase processes by consumers who are green in some aspect of their consumption. This process allowed strong theoretical saturation of the concepts outlined below. These findings were then further explored through focus groups, where the emphasis was on understanding the routes which have led to these different profiles of green and ethical consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the full interview protocol is available from the corresponding author on request.



A grounded, inductive approach was used in both the data gathering and data analysis stages in order to make sense of the detailed pictures of individual acts of (non)consumption. In practice this meant stepping away from the ways in which others have tried to characterise or understand green consumers and surface an account of how specific decision making processes built up a picture, first of how an individual approaches the greening of their lifestyle, and then how these approaches are similar and different to the approaches taken by others. In other words, in contrast to many of the approaches discussed above, our unit of analysis is the specific purchase (or non-purchase) decision process rather than the individual making that process. For each individual we are then able to compare and contrast multiple purchases. This approach supports two forms of analysis: the first is a comparison of the decision making processes across product types (this analysis has been presented in a separate paper); and the second is the patterns evident in the processes and strategies used by individuals to green their lifestyles when they are viewed as a series of (un)linked decision processes. This analysis is presented in the next section.

### **Findings: Three strategies for moving towards more sustainable consumption**

We began this study with Peattie's (1999) premise that there was no such thing as a green consumer. Our results certainly support this. We have discovered that, as predicted by McDonald et al (2006), empirically, almost all of the self-selected green consumers in our study can be classified as 'greening' rather than 'green'. On the one hand, they all engaged in some form of green or ethical activity, and on the other hand each of their lives contained at least some element of 'grey' consumption in product sectors where green alternatives clearly exist. This is not

surprising given the social, economic and technological infrastructures in the UK of which these consumers are a part.

Through this work we have uncovered three distinct strategies for greening consumption. In the sections that follow, we will introduce each of the categories in our typology, using empirical data to illustrate each in turn. Following the description of each component of our typology we will summarise the main ways in which these groups differ from each other. Our intention at this stage of enquiry was not to quantify these groups, but to characterise them with reference to our data, distinguish them from each other and to consider how their conceptualisation represents a departure from the work which has gone before.

### *Translators*

Translators are green in some aspects of their lives and grey in others. They do not necessarily think about sustainability in a holistic way. They are not motivated by a political agenda, but by a sense of trying to do what they perceive to be the right thing. The consumers in this group are open to change, although they are not deliberately change-seeking. So for example, one Translator commented that, *“I’m not very good at making sure everything I do is environmentally friendly as I’d like it to be. If I’m prompted in some way to do it then I will do it,”* (Interview 7) demonstrating the basic tension within the Translator strategy: a willingness to make changes in the future, without the willingness to seek out that change. They are also prepared to make a certain amount of sacrifice if they can see a clear rationale for adopting a new routine or a slightly less convenient activity. One interviewee reflects, *“I think after I read that [newspaper article] I realised how much you could do on a daily basis and then armed with those*

*little tips I started to do more*" (Interview 46). We have termed them 'Translators' because if they are made aware of a concrete action that they can take and they can see a clear benefit from doing it, then they are apt to undertake it: Translators translate awareness into specific actions.

Translators are the consumers that the marketers of the 80s and 90s hoped to find. Their belief in being better citizens and their willingness to change means that if they know that an aspect of their consumption is problematic for the environment, or for others, then they are likely to change it. Unusually, there is a very small gap between awareness and action for this group (see Peattie 2010 for a discussion of this issue). The problem here is not how to persuade them to change their behaviour, but how to communicate issues to them in the first place as they are extremely passive in their information seeking. This means that word of mouth and opinion leaders are key sources of information about behaviour change for Translators. Once they have got information however, they tend to be much less critical of it than the other groups, and will treat it in a straightforward way, implementing behaviour changes where they can see the impact of their actions. When they have gone through a process of changing a particular behaviour, these consumers may also express guilt or regret about not changing earlier.

The outcome of these attitudes and behaviours tends to be a slightly fragmented collection of consumer behaviours which may appear to be inconsistent when judged from the outside. For example, it is possible that a Translator might be committed to composting (something which may be considered 'deep green') but does not use local recycling facilities (something which might be considered to be more mainstream) simply because they had never been presented with any convincing arguments or appropriate information. However these activities may form a

coherent set of activities when viewed from the Translator's own perspective as they represent all the practices that they know about and can see a clear benefit from doing.

Due to this indiscriminate process of greening their consumption, Translators are also less likely to see the 'big picture' of sustainability. Although they may champion individual actions or products, they are unlikely to have a complex understanding of the interdependent nature of the elements of sustainability. Thus Translators may concentrate on the most tangible aspects of sustainability, such as reducing waste or lowering domestic energy or water use. They therefore are more likely to approach greening in an incremental, cumulative, product by product, process by process manner than to begin by articulating a principle and rearranging their lives accordingly.

### *Exceptors*

This group has the most sophisticated understanding of sustainability. In complete contrast to the Translators, this lifestyle is likely to be underpinned by, and designed to implement, a personal philosophy of consumption, such as, "*I don't believe in consumerism*" (Interview 9), or "*I would place myself more in the ecological radical side but I am trying to reduce consumerism rather than make it greener. I don't want green...I don't want green capitalism....I don't want capitalism in a greener version. I want less capitalism, a more people centred economy.*" (Interview 17). Sustainability is a priority for Exceptors in every aspect of their lives. Thus many, seemingly unrelated consumption choices, such as where to live and what to eat are seen as inextricably linked to the same issues and problems of living within a capitalist society and trying to achieve the least environmental impact coupled with the most social justice.

Exceptors are change-seeking. They see individual change and personal sacrifice as key to safeguarding the planet for future generations. They see themselves as rejecting many of the tenets of mainstream society and are comfortable with alternative products and outlets. They tend to belong to networks and will naturally seek out other Exceptors.

Although Exceptors are the most actively information seeking and information literate group, they cannot necessarily be reached by mainstream marketing. This is because they are highly critical (and even cynical) about most corporate and government communications. They favour and trust more specialist media, such as The Ethical Consumer magazine. They may engage in research about a product and are likely to extend this to research about the company that produces it. This means that not only do the product's manufacturing processes come under scrutiny, but the totality of a company's (or parent company's or country of origin's) activities can be judged as part of this process.

However, despite being the greenest group in our typology, we have termed these consumers Exceptors because we have found that they all have at least one aspect of their lives in which they behave like grey consumers. This exception to their otherwise coherent sustainable lifestyles is likely to be a relatively small, but conscious lapse into mainstream consumerism. Exceptions can take many forms, but in this study, centred as it was on technology-based products, we found a number of examples of small electrical appliances which you might have expected active green consumers like these to do without, such as a popcorn maker. We have found that during the purchase process for their 'exception' item, all of their normal information

seeking routines and sustainability criteria will be suspended. The Exceptors will offer (themselves and others) a specific justification for this aberration in their approach to consumption that allows them to be happy with their purchase decision and not let it affect their idea of themselves as green consumers. This justification can be made strongly in terms of personal joy or quality of life, *“I am an American and I just think.....I just love having a car”* (Interview 47) or more simply in terms of grey criteria, *“Yes we bought a bad thing but very convenient”* (Interview 60). Sometimes Exceptors have more than one exception to their otherwise green lifestyles.

### *Selectors*

The Selectors are an intriguing group. They are also likely to be the largest group in terms of numbers of the population, and therefore perhaps the most interesting to marketers. We term this group Selectors because they act as green or ethical consumers in one aspect of their lives, but as grey consumers in all other respects: Selectors select an aspect of sustainable consumption on which to focus. For example, they may be avid recyclers or pay a premium for green energy or sponsor a child in Africa but otherwise lead consumption oriented lives. This group is attracted or motivated by a single issue but is not interested in sustainability in a holistic way. So for example, one of our respondents was green in terms of their food shopping, *“I try to get organic where I can and there is another farmer’s market only once a month which is mainly organic stuff and there are a couple of little organic shops in the town not far from here. So that is roughly where I shop...I am a fair trader”*) but grey in terms of their approach to purchasing white goods, *“...an American type fridge freezer with the ice dispenser you know a big one and I know they are terrible, I know they are so we got one of those. ... because it had this ice*

making facility and I liked the looks of it and we have got another smaller fridge we keep in the garage but the one we have in our new formed kitchen I just you know it was a lifestyle thing I suppose, we just liked it. We went out deliberately to buy it. We weren't seduced into it we went into it with our eyes open.") (both Interview 71). Selectors do not see their own behaviour as contradictory. For the issue that they have selected to act on, they might mimic either the Translators or the Exceptors, in terms of their information seeking and change orientations, but they ignore all other issues completely.

This is a maddening scenario for marketers, and may account for some of the inconsistent results found by marketers in the past. If a Selector is interested in the aspect of green or ethical behaviour that an organisation is trying to promote then they may act as straightforward Translators and do as the marketing material provided suggests. S/he may even take up the cause actively like an Exceptor and get deeply involved in trying to make material changes to their own lives and perhaps even the lives of others. However, if the issue being promoted does not fall within their sphere of interest, they will simply ignore all marketing communications. Even if the aspect of sustainability a marketer wishes to influence does affect some Selectors, this success will have no benefit to others wishing to promote other, even seemingly comparable issues. For example, there is no reason to expect that someone who sponsors a child in Africa would donate their time to working in a charity shop. Nor would it necessarily be possible to persuade a consumer who went to great lengths to reduce their household energy consumption to take public transport or conserve water. In the same way that individuals can be multiple Exceptors, it is also possible that individuals could be multiple Selectors, favouring more than one (linked or unlinked) aspect of sustainable consumption.

### *Summary of the Typology*

There is more than one way to be a green or ethical consumer. Every green or ethical consumer is locked in a balance between grey and green consumption, but different groups will choose different solutions to resolve this tension: Translators will change but not seek information; Selectors will compartmentalise and act or ignore; and Exceptors will offer justifications for what they see as their transgressions. Even the greenest consumer will have grey aspects of consumption in their lifestyle.

By undertaking detailed, qualitative research into real purchases we have uncovered significant differences in the approaches that consumers take to green consumption. These differences cannot be predicted by the demographic, socioeconomic or psychographic characteristics of individuals, but rather by how they approach the problem of green or ethical consumption. These categories can be applied with confidence because our research process has led to strong theoretical saturation. Despite deliberately seeking out dissimilar consumer groups from a wide range of backgrounds and green and ethical perspectives, we have been able to incorporate the consumption behaviours of every one of our 81 participants into this typology.

Table 1 shows how Translators and Exceptors vary according to some key aspects of the purchase process. These aspects are somewhat different, and more difficult to research, than the constructs discussed above which centred on distinguishing individuals rather than their cumulative consumption strategies. However they offer ways to identify these groups in practice. As table 1 highlights, Selectors are not a distinct group per se. They can act as either Exceptors



or Translators but only for their chosen focus. Therefore Selectors will vary in any of these aspects, according to whether or not this issue is their chosen concern. If it is not their favoured issue then they will operate as if they were grey consumers.

<b>Aspect of consumption</b>	<b>Translators</b>	<b>Exceptors</b>	<b>Selectors</b>
Conception of sustainability	Fragmented	Holistic	Selectors may act as either Exceptors or Translators for their focus activity, but as grey consumers in all other aspects of their consumption
Orientation to information seeking	Passive	Active	
Treatment of sustainability information	Accepting and uncritical	Cynical	
Trusted information sources	Government info, product advertising, charity marketing campaigns	Specialist networks	
Information formats	Mainstream (television, direct mail)	Online searches for CSR. Specialist print media for product info	
Level of research focus	Products	Companies	
Compliance with information	High	Only if corroborated by research	
Motivation	Good citizen	Saving the planet	
Initiation of behaviour	External counsel	Internal values	

**Table 1. Identifying Translators, Exceptors, Selectors**

There is some previous evidence in the literature to support each of the three groups we have identified here. Exceptors and Translators, for example share common features with some of the proposed 'sliding scales' presented in the past. For example, the kinship between our Exceptor group and notions such as, 'deep greens' (Dermody 1999) or, 'true blue greens' (Ottman 1993) is evident. Equally, aspects of the concept of a Translator can be found woven into the assumptions

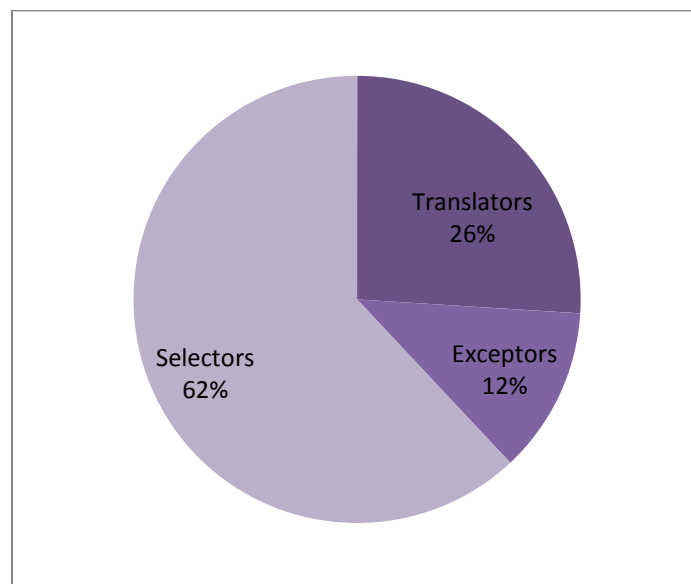
underpinning much of the environmental psychology literature on the role of information in increasing pro-environmental behaviours. Burgess et al (2003, p. 270) note that, 'cognitive approaches assume that increase in awareness will lead to more pro-environmental behaviour'. Whilst this has clearly not been the case for the population as a whole, it may be true for Translators, again, perhaps explaining weak or contradictory results. Another literature relevant to Translators is the work that has been done on Perceived Consumer Effectiveness (PCE) (Straughan and Roberts 1999) which centres on whether people feel that they are able to make a difference through their individual actions. In these terms, Translators can be characterised as a group with high PCE.

Perhaps the idea of a Selector offers the most radical departure from extant thinking on green consumer behaviour, but here too we can find precedents for the reporting of Selector behaviour, although this has often been interpreted as a negative research result. A number of studies (see for example, Balderjahn 1988; Pickett, Kangun and Grove 1993; Thørgersen and Ölander 2003) have reported a lack of 'spillover' between different types of pro environmental behaviour. Tracy and Oskamp (1983, p. 121) found that, 'behaviours are not interchangeable, even within conceptual categories'.

What is different here is that we have evidence of all of three approaches and conceptualise them as distinct, independent approaches to greening. In other words, we may have seen glimpses of these ideas before (although they may have been presented as aberrations or problems for environmental researchers) and each presents a faithful, but partial picture which has been helpful, but necessarily limited in its application. This typology offers the opportunity to

understand what all the different strategies for greening *are* (as opposed to what we thought or hoped they might be) and thus the ability to approach these groups in different ways.

It is not our intention here to suggest what proportions of green consumers use the three strategies we have identified. Our study was qualitative and the sampling strategy pursued was a theoretical one which does not allow us to make assertions about the population. In order to find out what proportion of consumers use each of these strategies a stratified random, representative sample of a much greater size would be required. However, of the 81 respondents we did interview, Figure 1 shows the proportion of each found group in our dataset.



**Figure 1: Proportions of strategies pursued by interviewees**

### *Complexifying the Typology*

There is a number of factors which affect the way that consumers play out their orientations to sustainable consumption in practice. This idea is not new and there is considerable research in the marketing literature which shows that green or ethical aspirations may be tempered by other

factors such as price (Harwood 2005). Our data show that other criteria such as availability and brand also moderate the relationship between green intentions and purchase behaviour.

Another factor which our data show as having a direct effect on individuals is the orientation of the people with whom they live. Both people who form part of a single household and those who live independently in multiple households can be affected by the opinions of other household members. This can have a restricting effect on green consumption (such as when a housemate refuses to purchase recycled toilet tissue or fair trade coffee) or a facilitating effect (such as when a partner sets up a system to compost household waste (Scott 2009)). There are other, less direct, ways in which other people can constrain the behaviour of individuals. For example, we have found a number of situations where landlords have either facilitated or blocked the purchase of green energy tariffs. In these situations, the green or ethical behaviour of the individual is not a direct consequence of their own orientation to sustainable consumption, but a negotiated, household outcome which may turn out to be more or less (or just differently) green or ethical than they would tend to be independently. This insight offers a significant critique of studies which examine individuals in isolation from their decision-making units, such as families or households (Burgess et al 2003).

A further way in which the data suggest that we need to complexify this typology is by viewing these positions as dynamic and considering the possibility of movement between them. For example, with the identification of both multiple Selectors and multiple Exceptors within our data, it is possible to conceptualise distinct groups of consumers ranging from the 'lighter green' position of a Selector, through various manifestations of multiple Selectors towards a situation

best described as a multiple Exceptor, and eventually to the 'darker green' position of the archetypal Exceptor. We suggest that it is probable that, although some green consumers may adopt a single strategy and continue to pursue that over many years, others may take different approaches to greening at different points of their lives. Understanding whether, how and when individuals make such transitions is an important direction for further study.

This notion of movement between strategies is particularly important because it raises the question of how consumers get into each of these groups in the first place. Our focus group data suggest that changes in greening tend to be incremental. We also believe that different people may be more or less disposed to different categories depending on their personal orientations to change and to information seeking. There also appears to be a connection between the ways in which people deal with paradoxes and inconsistencies in their consumption practices and the likelihood of belonging to certain groups. These are important areas for new research.

As indicated above, our data also provide evidence of both Selectors who act as Translators and Selectors who act as Exceptors, and the study of Selectors is an important matter for further research. This is particularly pertinent given the expected size of this group within the population. These groups do not exist independently of each other and our focus group data raise the issue of how they typically interact. For example, there is some evidence that Exceptors may have a role in informing the more passive Translators in their circles of friends and family. This finding would lend itself to a study informed by the work on 'opinion leaders' in marketing (Nisbet and Kotcher 2009) and 'role modelling' in social psychology (Smith, Cowie and Blades 2003).

### **Discussion: Grouping individuals by their strategy for greening**

These findings offer a significant critique to the extant green marketing literature which has sought to characterise individuals as either grey or green consumers, as discussed above. What we see is not a group of consumers who are entirely grey, a group who are entirely green and a third group which are neither one nor the other but that can be characterised as simply in transit between the two. Instead we have uncovered three groups of individuals who are neither grey nor green but approach the greening of their lifestyles in distinct ways. Translators, Exceptors and Selectors are all locked in a tension between grey and green consumption. For some of our respondents (mainly Exceptors) this tension is a real one which is experienced by the individuals as disquiet about specific aspects of their current lifestyles. However for others this tension is merely a conceptual one, seen by us as researchers and unnoticed by the individuals concerned. The three different strategies represent different ways to resolve this problem: adoption; compartmentalisation; change.

First of all, this challenges the assumption in much of the marketing, recycling and voluntary simplifier literatures that consumers are either green or not. Our data show that the traditional categories of grey and green consumer are not mutually exclusive and that, in line with Peattie (1999), purchases are both context and product dependent. Consequently it also contests the notion of a homogenous green or ethical consumer.

The typology helps explain why studies focused on consumers' demographics, socioeconomic groups and psychographics do not reveal consistent patterns. This is because a demographic profile, for example, is compiled at the level of an individual. However, if that individual is a

Selector then that individual will choose to undertake some green or ethical activities, but not others. For another Selector, the chosen activity might be different. Equally, one Translator may know about the activity under study, but another might not. Since individuals cannot be understood to act in uniform or coherent ways, it is unlikely that we can predict their behaviour from their personal, household or social characteristics.

Another way that researchers have tried to classify individuals is by surveying their intentions and implying that these can be taken as a proxy for their actions. Aside from the problem already discussed in the literature that people exaggerate or idealise their intentions (Perrin and Barton 2001), this is still problematic because, as the typology shows, an individual's values are not necessarily coherent. Examining intentions in order to classify them by motivation will also suffer from this problem. This is exacerbated by the fact that many intentions cannot be translated into real products and services because of the many constraints of the purchase process, the dampening effect of grey criteria such as time, money, and product availability or the moderating effect of others in the household.

Lastly, the typology offers some insight into why categorising consumers in terms of their concrete actions does not offer a solution to the problem of relying on intentions as a proxy for actions. These data also show that even actions do not tell us enough about individuals to determine whether or not they are green or ethical consumers (Newholm 2000). Firstly, taking Peattie's (1999) insights to their logical conclusion makes us aware that even if a consumer makes a choice to buy a green or ethical product at one point in time, there is no guarantee that even this very same consumer will replicate this decision in the future. Secondly, even though

three consumers buy exactly the same fridge or brand of coffee on the same day in the same shop for the same amount of money, they could each have taken a completely different set of values and research processes and implemented them in terms of different criteria and priorities in order to make that purchase. We have found evidence of different values, purchase criteria and research processes leading to exactly the same purchase outcome: the same make and model of white good purchased from the same retailer for a similar price. In other words, a Translator, a Selector and an Exceptor might all have the same concrete purchase outcome, so segmenting them according to their actions does not necessarily help us understand their behaviour or predict future purchases. Even if green or ethical consumers could be identified through examining their actions, this would not be sufficient to determine what kind of green or ethical consumer they are. In order to be able to place individuals in one of the three groups in the typology presented here, it is necessary to understand their orientations to research and purchase processes in some detail.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Our research shows that in order to understand an individual act of consumption it has to be looked at as part of a stream of purchase and non-purchase decisions which should be contextualised in terms of research and purchasing heuristics as well as lifestyle and philosophical approach. Looking at a large number of purchases in this way has allowed us to surface three distinct approaches to sustainable consumption. Rather than distinguishing between groups of consumers in terms of behavioural or attitudinal constructs, we have found that green consumers can be typed according to the strategies they employ for greening their lives. This typology can help explain why contemporary approaches to segmentation do not work in practice.



This work offers new challenges to marketers and policy makers hoping to promote different aspects of sustainable consumption. However it also offers new insights which raise a number of practical implications. In the past, marketers, and to some extent marketing researchers have conceptualised all consumers as if they are Translators or potential Translators. This is the consumer group that marketers hoped to 'find'. They are attractive to marketers and policy makers because a simple process of imparting information can lead to concrete actions. The passive relationship with information does make this group slightly harder to deal with in marketing terms, but these problems are not insurmountable. However, Translators may not be the correct target for marketing and policy initiatives as they are unlikely to be either the largest or the most influential group.

Some marketing research has made allowances for the existence of a 'deeper green' position which is more akin to our Exceptor. For example, literature on voluntary simplicity in the social psychology literature (see McDonald et al (2006) for a summary of this work) centres on active, committed individuals with a sophisticated understanding of sustainability that they attempt to operationalise through their consumption. Likewise, the action-oriented, information and solution seeking nature of the Exceptor has much in common with some of the literature on early adopters in the innovation literature (Venkatraman 1989). However our data suggest that both the Translator and Exceptor groups may in fact be more straightforward to address than the potentially larger Selector group with their fragmented actions and discriminating focus.

By framing the 'green consumer' as if they are a homogenous group of consistent individuals, marketers have assumed that green or ethical behaviour displayed in one aspect of consumption can be reproduced for other products or services. However as well as the 'disconnected' consumption patterns of Selectors, we have uncovered very different decision making processes associated with different products and sectors (McDonald et al. 2009), leaving marketers with no recourse to traditional ways of predicting future purchase acts from a previous purchase act.

The issue of how information is received and where it comes from is particularly pertinent (Oates et al. 2008): from the Translators' point of view, a green or ethical act explained to them and made achievable is likely to produce a change in behaviour, especially if associated marketing messages centre on the difference that their actions will make (Peattie 1999; Wisner 1998). Therefore, marketers can use traditional means of mass communication such as television advertising to inform this group of consumers. Recent multimedia campaigns in the UK, such as Act on CO<sub>2</sub>, aimed at reducing individual carbon footprints (Act on CO<sub>2</sub> 2010), and Recycle Now (Wrap 2010) typify this approach, as do national television commercials aimed at persuading the American public to replace traditional light switches with energy saving dimmer switches (Business Wire 2010). However our data suggest that perhaps the most effective information channel for the Translators is word of mouth and this is much harder for marketers and policy makers to instigate, sustain and control (Lam and Mizerski 2005). For Exceptors, mainstream communications will be received critically, so marketers need to utilise specialist channels such as The Ethical Consumer or green networks to gain credibility and approval for their products and services. Opinion leaders and word of mouth are also crucial here. Many organisations will not be considered by Exceptors due to past or current perceived unethical

activities for example Nestlé or Shell (Friedman 1999; Harrison, Newholm and Shaw 2005; Smith 1990). Selectors, as always, prove more difficult to reach, due to their particularly focused behaviour on one or more activities which may not be obviously linked in any coherent way. A traditional marketing approach which attempts to segment green consumers as all those interested in green or ethical matters might view a consumer who purchases organic products to be receptive to direct communications from Greenpeace, for example. Whilst this approach might be successful with a Translator or Exceptor (for different reasons), it may not necessarily be appropriate for Selectors. Reaching this latter group is really a process of trial and error for marketers. However, we suggest that although our typology might not necessarily help the marketer who is dependent on the more traditional segmentation strategies, we certainly see how it fits with more contemporary approaches to marketing. The integrated, holistic model (Kliatchko 2009) which puts customers firmly at the core of any marketing activity becomes essential to establish meaningful communications and relations. Aligned with a shift in emphasis towards nurturing customer communities which trust peer recommendations over advertising campaigns, marketers can use our typology to facilitate engagement with consumers based on a thorough understanding of their approach to sustainability, using real time data, insight and social media (Mulhern 2009). Our typology complements the current academic thinking in marketing which seeks to understand the consumer at an individual level rather than at the homogenous level of, for example, the 'green consumer'.

Given these issues, the best way to address the promotion of sustainable consumption may not be through marketing alone, but through a combination of marketing and policy initiatives. For example, limiting the choice of products available through legislation will guarantee greener or

more ethical choices by all three of these groups, as well as the grey consumer. In the UK recent joint industry and government action will see the phasing out of standard light bulbs altogether by 2011 (Energy Saving Trust 2010). This means that all consumers will be obliged to purchase low energy products, reducing the energy consumption and CO<sub>2</sub> output of domestic lighting in the UK. However these measures are only really possible where the scientific (and economic) case is compelling and unambiguous, which is not the case for many products or technologies.

One key aspect that distinguishes Exceptors from the other groups is their holistic and sophisticated understanding of sustainability. As noted above, each of the groups views its own patterns of consumption as if they have an internal coherence, which may not be apparent to others. However Exceptors, because of their conscious strategy of greening, can also be viewed as making (mainly) coherent, consistent decisions from an external point of view. It was noted above that Translators are what marketers *hoped* to find. In many ways, Exceptors are the group of consumers that marketers *expected* to find, in that they undertake a series of actions that can be viewed as consistent and are underpinned by specific beliefs and values.

Looked at another way, we argue that if an individual does not have a sophisticated understanding of sustainability then they can only take Translator or Selector approaches to greening their lifestyles, or not green them at all (grey consumers). We stress that whilst having a thorough understanding of sustainability will not automatically imply an Exceptor approach, an individual cannot be (or become) an Exceptor without this kind of knowledge. Thus we argue that education has a key role to play in the development or socialisation of individuals with more active, holistic approaches to greening their lifestyles. This leads us to suggest a twofold

strategy: Firstly, policy makers need to embed sustainability in the school curriculum in order to give the next generation access to the kind of knowledge that will give some of them the foundation for action (Duvall and Zint 2007; Evans, Gill and Marchant 1996; Uzzell 1994); Secondly, having identified this aspect of Exceptional make up, we argue that traditional marketing techniques could be used to identify members of this relatively small group and use their natural predilection for networks and active orientation for greening to help policy makers and social marketers promote green behaviours amongst the other groups. In other words, educate them to educate others. Within the communications literature, this effect is known as a two-step flow where, 'ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from these to the less active sections of the population' (Lazarfield, Berelson and Gaudet 1948, cited in Katz 1957, p. 61). Following this idea, subscribers to *The Ethical Consumer* or members of specific networks could be invited to seminars about how best to inform others. Education rather than marketing approaches are likely to have more success with this critical group, especially if they were sponsored by relevant NGOs, although Nisbet and Kotcher (2009, p. 339) note that, 'opinion leaders should be trained not as educators disseminating information about climate change, but as communications strategists initiating conversations with friends and acquaintances, deliberately framing messages in ways that make them more meaningful and persuasive to their recipients'. Again, we see consistency here with our proposed strategies and the ideas that are developing in marketing communication studies which centre on a coherent, narrative approach involving new opinion formers such as bloggers, rather than simply an advertising-based model of message dissemination (Dahlen, Lange and Smith 2010).

In conclusion, much of the work that has been undertaken by social scientists has focused on one of a number of fragments of the complex picture that is presented here. By building up these many insights, using the typology as a sense making framework, a less partial picture has been developed. Increasing green consumption has been understood as a consumer behaviour issue (or problem) but researched in a different way it is revealed to be a more complex problem than marketing alone can tackle. This will require a qualitative research approach which moves away from reductionism and simplification towards embracing complexity.

### **Further Research**

As indicated above, more research is needed to establish how people get into the three groups described in our typology. Our view of consumption accepts it as a socially constructed process. This raises the question of whether people could effectively be brought up, or otherwise socialised, as grey consumers, or as Translators, Selectors or Exceptors. We also need to research the possibility that people could move between groups. In depth, qualitative analysis will be required to identify any trigger points which facilitate this kind of movement. Our focus group data suggest that for many this movement will be an incremental, gradual assimilation over a long period of consumption history. We also need to know more about the potential inter-relationships between these groups. Narrative research methods could be employed to study whether there are any common routes between groups. Further work will also be required to uncover the roles of the more active Exceptors as information brokers and practical advocates in the Translator and grey consumer groups.

Further research into why Exceptors remain grey in one (or more) respect could also be undertaken. Infrastructure alone does not offer an explanation for a non-essential purchase such as a popcorn maker and it would be very interesting to know whether identity issues are at the root of these decisions.

In order for this work to be useful to marketers and policy makers, it will also be important for us to establish the proportions of these three groups within the wider population. A larger scale, quantitative study is planned to test the existence of these groups and to provide data about the prevalence of these strategies in a representative sample of the population.

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