



Project Energy Code

Visibility, Ambivalence and Trust:
Cultural Stumbling Blocks to Greater
Household Energy Efficiency

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EcoAlign Project Energy Code

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This paper has been written for EcoAlign to provoke critical thinking on why consumers who may “talk the talk” in relation to understanding global warming and the need for energy conservation do not “walk the walk.” In this essay, I examine consumption from an anthropological standpoint and suggest that the moral stance taken by many environmentalists against consumption and materialism flies in the face of societal realities, creating ambiguity, guilt and ambivalence among consumers. One logical conclusion of this effect is to shift the emphasis towards changing the *nature* and *quality* of consumption rather than the just the *quantity*. Information and education alone is not enough – energy efficiency must be visible and consumable. Utilities, manufacturers and retailers, as well as consumers, have a role to play in developing innovations that effectively allow people to consume, display and exchange energy efficiency in a way that is visible and valued within society on a day-to-day basis, for example carbon-trading gift cards or environmentally friendly rewards schemes for purchases that reduce one’s carbon footprint. More research is required to develop the ideas presented in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable focus in Europe and the US on getting consumers to take responsibility for the global environment and playing their part in reducing global warming by changing their behavior over the past decade since the Kyoto agreement. This pressure has become increasingly felt in the US over the last three to four years, particularly since the success of Al Gore’s film *An Inconvenient Truth*. However, “green behavior” is still more common among people of higher income brackets and higher age

groups, with a majority of people perceiving “going green” as costly, and, well, inconvenient.ⁱ

Environmentalists call for a fundamental change in culture to close the gap between consumer behavior and intentions, with a focus on creating *socially motivated consumers*. To date this movement has focused on regulatory mandates or actions and a campaign of information and education, based on the assumption that if consumers obtain sufficient relevant information they will respond directly by changing their behavior in accordance with recommendations.

But evidence suggests that this is backfiring, the level of green guilt pushing people away from environmentally responsible behaviors as much as towards it. This backlash is a predictable response within a culture that values freedom of choice and independence. It has been made worse by the fact consumers as a whole are at the same time vilified as greedy, overindulgent, irresponsible and the root of all societies’ problems.

The message from science with regard to the destructive impact of certain industries and consumer behaviors upon the planet has become submerged in a much older and wider critique of consumption as something intrinsically bad.ⁱⁱ

But this attitude towards consumption is shallow and riddled with ambiguity and contradiction, not least on the part of those taking such a moral stance who are, themselves, consumers. Only by changing the way that we view consumers and consumption and understand the real driving forces behind consumerism can we hope to influence the way people relate to and behave towards the environment. The purpose of this essay is to look closer at who is a consumer from a more cultural perspective, why and how do they consume, and how does this interact with issues of sustainable consumption. Consumers make an infinite number of decisions each day as individuals, and yet, “No human exists except steeped in the culture of his time and place.” I argue that all consumers are “socially motivated” – just not in the way that environmentalists would like them to be.

WHAT IS CONSUMPTION?

Humans consume – in order to live they require food, water, shelter, and protection from the heat and cold and then they require all those other things that allow them to participate within the society in which they live. Consumption is a series of practices that fulfill a multiplicity of purposes. For

the vast majority of people and in the vast majority of situations consumption is not an end in and of itself. Consuming goods and services is a constant activity in daily life and ranges from the trivial – switching on a light, picking up the phone to call home – to the most significant purchases – buying a new car or a new home. Some decisions around consumption are more conscious than others – psychology has shown that many “decisions” that we make from day to day are actually scripted deep within our subconscious as a mechanism to prevent ourselves from being overloaded and paralyzed by the multiplicity of choices that face us constantly.

Economists like to reduce consumer choice to an equation made up of our functional and emotional needs – there is an idea that we adopt optimizing behavior that maximizes *utility* subject to budgetary and other constraints. Thus a person will buy food because s/he is hungry. The type of food will depend on his or her economic situation, as well as a blur of ill-defined individually motivated emotional factors – such as whether s/he is a vegetarian, ate the same thing yesterday, or prefers a particular brand. These *emotional* factors are often perceived as a function of the luxury of choice and also consider the consumer as an entirely independent entity.

Veblen’s work on conspicuous consumption (first published in 1899!) set the stage for consumption of goods to be seen as “a means of invidious comparison,” asserting and maintaining a form of social status and innately immoral as a source of one-upmanship. In contrast, Bordieu saw consumers as victims of producers, their social status condemning them to suffer the economic limitations constraining consumption. At this end of the scale, consumers have been portrayed as entirely irrational, the weak victims of producers – manipulated into buying all sorts of goods against any rational thought or intent.

All these theories leave so much unexplained. We are rational beings, able to make conscious choices based on our needs and preferences and yet “the wretched consumer often feels like the passive holder of a wallet whose contents are being sucked out by impersonal forces.”ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a growing consensus that consumerism and consumption should be understood as far more complex than these approaches suggest. According to UNDP^{iv}, consumption is “a means to human development,” opening up opportunities without which people remain in poverty. Consumption is a means of participating in the life of a community, expressed in terms of standards of dress, transport, food, housing, etc. Embedded deep within all human societies, “Goods are the words of a social language.” Gifts are an expression of love and connectedness between people. Goods can be a public expression of place within society. Even in the poorest of societies

people accumulate material goods as an expression of their place in their world.

"Goods are for making sense. Goods are for rational beings to make sense of their universe. Consuming is finding consistent meanings. You cannot make sense of an individual item of information. You cannot make music out of one note, make poetry out of one word. Sense lies in the whole discourse, in the whole poem, the whole tune, and the problem for the anthropologist looking at the uses of goods is to scan his/her material for the whole structure of meanings." ⁱⁱⁱ

Culture is constantly changing and just as every purchase can be seen within a cultural context as responding to a sense of shared identity within an existing culture, it is at the same time individual in its nature and driving the evolution of culture over time. This in itself creates space for the idea that individuals at one and the same time belong to cultures at multiple scales and that each household and individual within that household is fundamentally different while at the same time existing within a very real shared cultural context. The existence of such a vast array of goods and their seemingly infinite combinations are such that material goods themselves increasingly contribute towards the diversity and continuously evolving cultures and subcultures that make up America today.

And yet the battle cry of the environmental movement can be characterized as saying "Materialism pollutes the soul! The enemy is us!"

The problem of global warming and CO₂ production is undoubtedly an example of the Tragedy of the Commons - the benefits of energy use, be it driving to school on a cold day, buying a gift for a child or throwing batteries out in the trash instead of recycling them - is felt immediately by the consumer while the costs of that decision are infinitesimally small, spread across all consumers. Nonetheless, that consumerism and materialism is something that has come to be condemned as somehow "immoral," in spite of the universality and essential nature of material consumption, is of fundamental importance in considering the role of people in reducing the production of CO₂ in the atmosphere and their responsibility towards addressing global warming and sustainable energy use.

HOW DO THEORIES OF CONSUMPTION RELATE TO SUSTAINABLE ENERGY USE?

The above description of “cultural consumers,” motivated by a panoply of pleasures, possibilities, projections of identity and even fantasy, are a far cry from environmentalists’ ideal of a “socially motivated consumer” whose activities are governed by various forms of collective or voluntary association. Consumers are socially motivated, but in the way they know how – linked intimately with their own social space and identity. The question then becomes, how can environmental needs become a part of that social being? This is what I consider to be the root of the “**Green Gap.**” Understanding that process better and finding ways to actively address it requires input from a range of fields and close collaboration between them, including economics, anthropology, political science and psychology.

There are three fundamental challenges to this process that link directly to individuals as consumers of energy: **visibility, trust/ambiguity, and ambivalence.**

VISIBILITY

“As for tribal society, so the same for us. Rituals are conventions which set up visible public definitions. If you want meanings to stay still enough to be transmitted from one person to another, you have to try to make them public and visible and recognizable.”ⁱⁱⁱ (p.267)

Much behavior by consumers that relates to energy consumption is invisible to the broader public and in many cases to other members within the household. One of the fundamental problems of increasing energy efficiency is that we only see what people *do* do, or *do* consume as opposed to what they *don't*. We can see our neighbor leave for work on a bicycle or walk their children to school, but so long as we are driving our car we cannot show how reducing our speed has increased mileage efficiency. One of the most conspicuous, and among the most successful, of green products has been the hybrid car – a clearly visible statement of green intent. However, much energy efficient behavior within the household is hidden behind closed doors and so there is little evidence of behavior in others for us to follow. We cannot see if our neighbors have turned down their thermostat or water heater, or replaced an old refrigerator with an Energy Star product. Energy is used to meet various needs, such as the need to feel full and satisfied, to

have, for example, heat and light. But as long as the energy system is working and performing in accordance with our demands, it is essentially “invisible.” It only becomes visible when it is *not* working.

The hypothesis here is that the social function of consumption could work to increase energy efficiency if it could be made more visible. Would creating greater visibility of energy consumption practices impact a particular behavior of an individual within his/her broader social group? A series of experiments on social norms suggests that the answer to this question is yes.

Robert Cialdini from Arizona State University and fellow researchers, used the concept of **descriptive social norms** to hypothesize that individuals are more likely to follow the lead of others, with increasing likelihood as the number of others and their similarity to each other increased. In an experiment comparing **towel reuse in hotels**, the proportion of hotel guests that reused their towel was 25% higher in rooms where they were informed that the majority of other guests in the hotel also reused their towels, compared with the standard sign that exhorted customers to reuse their towels purely on the basis of environment stewardship. The proportion rose to 33% higher when guests were informed that previous guests in their room had reused their towels. In other words, **as similarity increased so did the impulse to mimic that behavior.**

The same researchers that did the towel reuse study also did a similar study in which they placed appeal signs on the doorknobs of houses within a mid-size Californian community. They used four different signs over a period of four weeks, emphasizing to residents that energy saving behavior would (1) help the environment, (2) benefit society, (3) save money, or (4) were common in their neighborhood. While the majority of respondents rated the normative appeals as least likely to change behavior, when the researchers examined actual energy use by recording their electricity meter readings, the normative appeal was most effective in reducing actual energy use.

Much energy use is highly trivial and we would soon be swamped if each and every practice was in some way monitored and shared among peers. Can increased visibility of energy efficient behavior impact on in a more general, less focused way?

While the economics of consumer behavior is not a focus of this essay, it is noteworthy that economic savings that can be made out of energy efficiency^v are also highly invisible with regards energy use. Energy efficiency comes at a cost, requiring us to change technologies or behaviors or both. But that cost brings benefits in terms of reduced energy consumption that reduces our environmental impact and can save money in

the longer term. However, researchers have identified such returns to investments in energy efficiency to be highly invisible at household as well as at a national level. It is hard to measure what you do not use. Consumers seem to demand much greater financial returns from investments in energy efficiency than from bank accounts, stocks, or other investments. Researchers found much less investment took place in energy efficiency than would be economically rational.

While I argue in favor of visibility, it is not enough to change behavior in and of itself, and can work perversely – an effect well known to economists as the *Jevons Paradox*. We don't see whether those people driving hybrids use their vehicle more or less than someone who owns a "gas guzzler" and the increased efficiencies can just as easily encourage higher consumption. Cars have become vastly more efficient over the decades, not the least of which through environmental improvements like catalytic converters, but until recently that efficiency has only led to bigger, faster cars, such as SUVs.

AMBIVALENCE

Today, consumers are dealing with "the feeling of being pulled by an increasing insecurity about knowing what to do and an increased awareness of possessing agency, the capacity to do something."^{vi}

Perhaps the most complex area of consumer behavior in relation to energy conservation is in terms of the absolute amount of material goods that consumers acquire and use, all of which require energy in their production. Indeed, many believe that the popularity of recycling as a green behavior is that it is some way justifies greater levels of consumption, since consumers are not faced with highly visible accumulated goods. The culture of accumulation, while deeply individualistic is also intergenerational, with each generation aspiring to ensure their offspring will have all the opportunities that they had, and more, to achieve the American Dream.

In a study involving self identified "green consumers" in Ireland, researchers found a range of inconsistencies, ambivalence and dilemma in the respondents' practices – a radical environmentalist who flew quite regularly, a woman who boycotted companies for their ethical practices and yet was a smoker who bought Marlboro cigarettes, and another who avoids "junk food" such as MacDonalds who bought popcorn, crisps and chocolate on a daily basis. (J. Connolly and A. Prothero, 2008)

If people believe that they are central to environmental solutions through their own individual consumption, inevitably particular practices or goods that may be central to an individual in terms of social identity clash with what has been identified as bad. This rapidly leads to a situation in which people construct a baseline of “needs” within the social context in which they live in order to justify consumer practices that are embedded within their identity.^{vii} “We need a large car because we have a large family and tend to have other people’s kids as well and travel regularly to visit family in neighboring towns.” For many people, much of the time, use of energy is not optional. Many small businesses or independent traders have to drive in order to run their businesses. Most consumers see compromise with environmental imperatives as inevitable, but we also deal with it by describing our own levels of consumption as basic.

In other words, the condemnation of all consumption as being morally wrong flies in the face of real people’s real relationship with material goods which inevitably leads to feelings of guilt, ambivalence, powerlessness, compromise and inconsistencies in addressing environmental issues at the personal level. Even the greenest of consumers are ambiguous about what it means to be “green” and find themselves constantly asked to compromise in their day to day consumption decisions. These dilemmas over whether or not they are doing the “right thing” are intensified by the lack of clarity that exists around the idea of sustainability. The sense of empowerment that accompanies responsibility for global environmental processes coexists with uneasiness and weakness, reliant on other social actors to provide guidance in determining what is right and wrong and where that responsibility starts and stops.

TRUST

Energy at the point of purchase or use is just one element in a whole series of processes that together make up how we as end users relate to and identify with material goods and services. The prevailing climate of mistrust of producers and their motivations to make money out of consumers ahead of any moral imperative towards social or environmental responsibility contrasts with the sense of power that consumers feel when presented with the responsibility to act more environmentally responsibly and the possibility of using the power of their purse to influence consumers. Thus there is a deeply embedded conflict of ambiguity among consumers: How can this sense of power be matched with the prevalent view of the consumer as weak and impotent in the face of powerful producers?

During the energy crisis of the 1970s researchers compared responses of consumers who received brochures advising on how to reduce energy use in air conditioning, with the brochures originating from different sources. They found that 17% of recipients acted on the advice when it was sent from government agencies compared to 0% of those who received the information from the utility company. Energy companies have invested \$\$\$ in improving their image and changing consumer perceptions of them, but there remains mistrust in terms of who to believe and what is motivating companies that are ultimately driven by profits to encourage energy conservation behavior.

There is an ongoing battle over who can consumers trust, with green consumer websites seizing a moral high-ground in assessing the green credentials of a myriad of different products marketed as green or otherwise. Lack of trust of utility companies is not new. The prolific nature of green consumer websites could equally be seen as a reflection of the growing anxiety among “green consumers” that they cannot trust the information that they receive from producers and need an “independent” watch dog to assess the credentials of certain products.

WHAT DOES ALL THIS MEAN FOR INFLUENCING ENERGY CONSUMPTION AMONG CONSUMERS?

Energy use depends on, and behavior change is limited by multiple factors (e.g. available technology, knowledge, money, convenience, trust in information, personal situations and capabilities, market factors).

There is increasing acknowledgement of the importance of understanding consumer behavior from a broader standpoint if we are to achieve the kinds of changes in behavior that is required to reduce emissions of CO₂ in a meaningful way.^{viii}

A Yale/Gallup/ClearVision Institute poll in July 2007 found 69% of Americans were convinced that global warming is caused by human activity. However, only 50% of Americans worried a great deal (15%) or a fair amount (35%) about global warming.

There appears to be significantly greater concern about climate change in the European Union and even some major developing countries (e.g., Brazil, India) than in China or the United States. In a study produced by the Yale Project on Climate Change^{ix}, nearly 70%

of Americans said they rarely discussed global warming within their immediate social networks Convincing people to change their behavior has likewise proved difficult with highly mixed results to efforts to promote

environmental efficiency even where these have included considerable financial incentives.^x

In this essay I have argued that a fundamental reason for this lack of impact has been the vilification of consumerism that takes little account of the fundamental values of consumption and why individuals consume, which is not out of mindless greed but in response to a complex web of culture and belonging.

This paradigm demands a new approach to the question of influencing behavior – one that works with people’s desires to “fit” and to honor their rituals and traditions while at the same time enabling them to respond to their increased sense of responsibility for global environmental problems that largely originates in their engagement with globalization and subsequent connectedness to the rest of the world. The potential of descriptive social norms to influence consumer behavior in relation to the environment, described earlier in this paper adds weight to this argument of importance of social belonging and culture and presents an important opening in how such a view might be used to leverage changes in behavior. The focus must surely be on changing the quality and nature of consumption rather than challenging its existence. An important first step in this direction is to investigate consumer behavior in relation to their everyday decisions and dilemmas, starting from a basis that the current culture is something to be worked with and understood, rather than repressed and denied.

This essay has focused on the challenge of changing consumer behavior. This focus does not mean that technological solutions for energy efficiency or legislative measures to enforce greater efficiency are not fundamental in the fight for environmental conservation. Climate change is far too big a beast to be tamed by individual choices over energy efficient appliances. While such choices are undoubtedly important, there also needs to be a “top-down” approach, with governments, working internationally, to take responsibility for making sure that we cannot choose that which is demonstrably harmful.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

There are three areas for future research that stems from the hypotheses described in this essay:

1. Understanding better how energy consumption and environmental issues are “bundled” within the broader context of people’s day to day lives.

2. Understanding the ways in which information surrounding energy use and decisions over consumer practices flows within and between households and social networks.
3. Identifying ways in which energy efficient behavior can be made more visible and the impacts of different media in communicating this information.

These three areas would require a combination of focus group interviews, and other more qualitative methods such as record keeping and behavioral observation among a number of specific groups that are more and less connected. Such focus groups may be identified through membership of institutions such as churches, schools, universities, mosques, etc., as well as using random geographical sampling.

PROJECT ENERGY CODE BACKGROUND

EcoAlign, a strategic marketing agency, was launched to understand, document and develop strategies to close the “green gap” between consumers’ stated intentions and their actual purchasing behavior in connection to energy consumption and the environment. We deeply believe that for the “green gap” to be addressed a massive societal behavioral change is required, one that will be driven by more than good green products. For this reason, EcoAlign is now working with social scientists to start a discussion on customer behavior towards sustainable energy consumption and conservation by identifying emotional, social, instinctual, psychological, subconscious codes that shape human actions and perceptions. This initiative is called “Project Energy Code.”

ECOALIGN: THE ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

EcoAlign is the energy and environment marketing agency. We develop and execute marketing strategies for utilities, renewable energy providers and companies operating in the energy and environment space. We are uniquely suited to help companies achieve their business objectives, from reaching efficiency program targets and improving customer satisfaction, to launching new products, increasing market share and repositioning for growth in the green tech space.

THE AUTHOR

P. Chenevix Trench is a natural scientist from Oxford University, with a PhD in biological anthropology. Her work to date has focused on rural development in Africa, including the study of household economies and decision-making, environmental management, policy analysis and advocacy, and natural resource conflict.

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For more information about EcoAlign, visit our website at www.ecoalign.com.

ENDNOTES

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- ^{viii} E.g., the Behavior, Energy and Climate Change Conference, convened by the Precourt Institute for Energy Efficiency at Stanford University, the California Institute for Energy and Environment at the University of California, and the American Council for an Energy Efficient Economy, was the first national conference focused on understanding the behavior and decision-making of individuals and organizations and using that knowledge to help accelerate our transition to an energy-efficient and low-carbon economy.
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