

# **REDUCING ECOLOGICAL FOOTPRINTS THROUGH INDIVIDUAL SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The “green” market is booming with an estimated value of \$209 billion (van Engelen 2008). A give-and-take relationship between consumers and corporations fuels the trend of consumers adopting green, socially responsible lifestyles. Extant literature on Individual Social Responsibility (ISR) utilizes samples from either the general population (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Coddington 1990; Laroche, Bergeron, and Barbaro-Forleo 2001) or specific segments such as sustainable living communities (Moisander and Pesonen 2002; Bekin, Carrigan and Szmigin 2007). Past research findings indicate that the ‘typical’ socially responsible consumer is of an above average socioeconomic status (Anderson and Cunningham 1972; Roberts 1996; Webster, Jr. 1975). However, since then, the concepts of sustainable living and social responsibility have gained mainstream appeal. Therefore, it is reasonable to conjecture that a wider range of consumers have incorporated socially responsible practices into their lives. Today, a large proportion of the U.S. population is comprised of individuals of lower socioeconomic status. Corporations that hope to reap benefits from consumers for their CSR activities must have a better understanding of the priorities and values of these individuals of lower socioeconomic status to better target their needs and preferences. It is important to note that a variety of factors including laws and regulations, level of education, and exposure to socially responsible practices in other countries, influence individuals’ perceptions and practices of socially conscious behaviors. For example, many European Union countries have more stringent environmental laws relative to the U.S, and several, including the UK and Sweden, have instituted compulsory recycling in recent years with varying rates of success (McCarthy 2005). This study contributes to the ISR and marketing literatures by examining previously unexplored market segments thereby aiding corporations and other organizations in improving their social marketing strategies.

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The primary objective of this research was to investigate the views and values of lower socioeconomic status individuals in less regulated environments. We explored these individuals’ perceptions of social responsibility, their engagement in socially responsible behaviors, and the motivators and de-motivators, driving and detracting from socially responsible actions.

## **METHOD**

The data was gathered through participant observations, written narratives, and interviews with students and consumers about social consciousness/responsibility issues. The written narratives from full and part-time business students and consumers were analyzed through an iterative process (McCracken 1988; Miles and Huberman 1984; Schouten 1991). The data comprised of thirty-two transcriptions of descriptions of social consciousness and personal narratives, 20 of which was produced by female and 12 by male informants.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Findings indicate that the practice, and non-practice, of socially responsible behaviors influenced individuals’ sense of self-worth. Respondents who engaged in socially responsible practices viewed themselves as ‘good people’ whereas those who chose not to engage in such behaviors experienced some degree of guilt. This indicates that, in this day and age where social responsibility is at the forefront of public awareness, there is a potential for individuals to integrate social responsibility into their identity. Findings also indicate that certain individuals change their practice of socially responsible behaviors when moving from one context to another. This latter finding behooves us to examine the influence of local eco and recycling infrastructures on individuals’ adoption and continuation of socially responsible behaviors. The analysis indicates that a better understanding of the interplay between national regulations, local eco-infrastructure, corporate support, and individual consumer motives is necessary to make a lasting change in consumer behaviors with regard to social responsibility.

References Available on Request