

Analysis of the Influence of Reference Groups on Green Consumption Behavior in the Context of New Media

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Abstract: Green consumption behavior has become one of the defining characteristics of consumer behavior in China. Reference groups, a crucial type of social group, serve as objects of comparison and reference for individuals or groups when making consumption decisions. This paper elaborates on the connotation and extension of reference groups, analyzes the gap between consumers' green consumption attitudes and behaviors, and explores the influence mechanisms of reference groups. On this basis, it proposes strategies and suggestions to promote green consumption behavior

1. Introduction

Green consumption behavior refers to a sustainable and responsible consumption pattern that arises after recognizing environmental issues, where consumers make purchases with the dual goals of fulfilling their needs and reducing environmental impact. As awareness of environmental crises deepens, an increasing number of consumers recognize their responsibility to purchase environmentally friendly products and uphold green consumption values and attitudes[1-2]. However, the proportion of consumers who actually translate this green consumption awareness into real green consumption behavior remains very low. In a culture that emphasizes collectivism, which differs from the socially oriented and interdependent self of individualistic cultures, social outcomes and product image characteristics dominate the values recognized by consumers. As a result, others' evaluations and social norms become key factors influencing consumers' purchasing and usage behaviors[3]. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis of the influence of reference groups on the gap between green consumption attitudes and behaviors, to explore how reference groups can be leveraged to promote green consumption behavior among consumers.

2. The Connotation and Extension of Reference Groups

A reference group is a representative social group that must be distinguished from ordinary groups. A reference group refers to the individuals or groups that serve as a point of comparison when a person or a group makes shopping and consumption decisions[4-5]. For instance, in a university, students from one class may select another class as their reference group, using the current state of the reference class to assess the development of their own class. However, in some cases, the reference group may not belong to the same category or group. The reference group changes based on the varying needs for comparison, and the meaning of the same reference group can evolve over time[6].

Reference groups often significantly influence members' emotions, cognition, values, and attitudes, thereby enhancing or weakening the group's cohesion. The consumption attitudes, intentions, and behaviors of a group affect the individual, and this influence is based on a personal mechanism of reference and comparison[7]. This referential influence is crucial and not incidental. The extension of reference groups primarily includes: 1) groups that serve as a point of reference; 2) groups that can gain or maintain recognition; and 3) groups whose opinions are accepted by the actor. Therefore, reference groups encompass both those with whom there is direct communication and interaction, as

well as those who, even without direct interaction, have an influence on the actions of the individual or group.

3. The Mechanism of Reference Groups on Green Consumption Behavior in the Context of New Media

Green consumption is a behavior that supports society, but consumers often face conflicts of interest when engaging in it. The research by Gupta and Ogden found that consumers encounter a dilemma when making green consumption decisions, recognizing the gap between green consumption attitudes and behaviors as reasonable. The social dilemma refers to the choice faced by consumers who are members of a reference group: one option is cooperation to maximize group benefits, and the other is non-cooperation to maximize personal benefits. In the short term, non-cooperation can yield higher returns for individuals compared to cooperation. When individuals act solely based on their own interests without considering other group members, it harms the interests of all group members, including themselves, especially those of the reference group that the individual values. If everyone chooses cooperation over non-cooperation, generally speaking, everyone will ultimately receive higher returns. However, the environmental benefits brought by green consumption are widely shared and lack clear group boundaries, leading to the ambiguity of group benefits, particularly those of reference groups[8]. This ambiguity weakens the incentive effect of the reference group benefits that consumers value within the group, thereby hindering the influence of reference group norms on green consumption behavior[9].

Green consumption is a form of social cooperation behavior that not only contributes to environmental protection but also typically involves higher costs and uncertain benefits. Green consumption requires consumers to spend time and effort searching for products that meet green standards and discerning product information to avoid being misled. Additionally, green consumption demands that consumers accept higher product prices, lower product performance, and overcome preferences and habits associated with non-green standards. As a result, green consumption significantly increases overall costs[10]. Although most consumers hold positive attitudes toward green consumption, they still primarily consider their own interests when making purchases. In the face of the social dilemma of green consumption, the ambiguity of environmental benefits leads to unclear reference group benefits. Consequently, most consumers opt for non-cooperative behavior, disregarding group norms and group interests, which results in a gap between green consumption attitudes and actual behavior[11]. Therefore, the influence of reference groups can be utilized to help consumers clarify their green consumption attitudes, thereby enhancing their green purchasing intentions and ultimately achieving green purchasing behavior (See Figure 1).

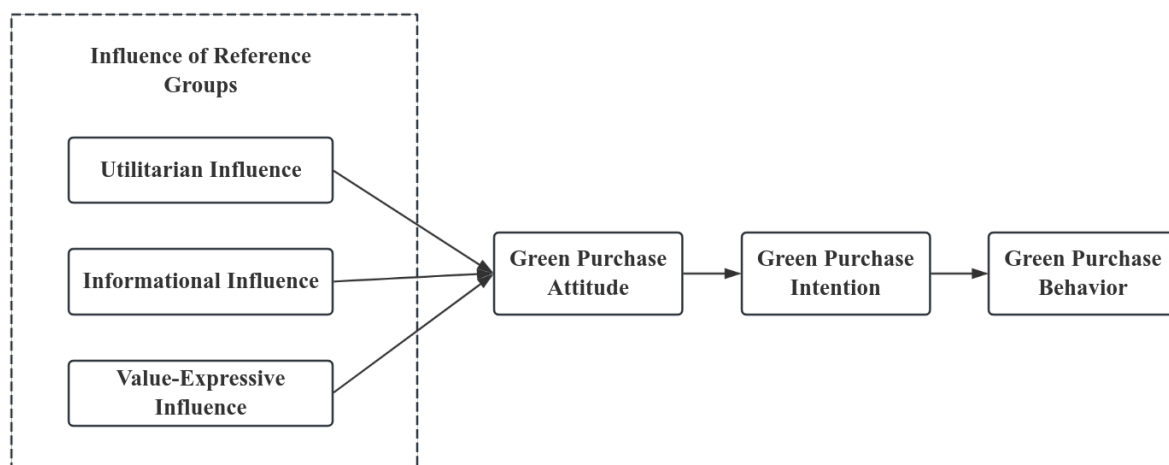


Figure 1. The Mechanism of Reference Groups on Green Consumption Behavior

4. Analysis of the Influence of Reference Groups on Green Consumption Behavior

4.1. Promoting Green Consumption through Utilitarian Influence

4.1.1. Promoting Altruism

Most companies can use marketing strategies to convey various messages to consumers, such as: "Green consumption can enhance social welfare, while harmful environmental consumption can hurt others," thereby generating external pressure on consumers to engage in green consumption. This social group effect can motivate consumers' green consumption intentions. Since reference groups exert pressure on consumers, impacting their environmental consciousness to some extent, companies can leverage this by shaping public preferences, thereby pressuring consumers and cultivating their intention to engage in green consumption. Additionally, media stories, such as films, can be utilized to raise public awareness of green consumption. For example, the movie **The Mermaid** primarily uses the story of a mermaid to emphasize the importance of environmental protection. Through situational storytelling, a green consumption atmosphere is created, promoting green consumption behavior among Chinese residents.

4.1.2. Improving Laws and Regulations

Compared to advanced foreign countries, China's environmental legislation and regulatory systems are still lacking, and moral constraints are not entirely satisfactory. Defining actions such as avoiding the use of disposable tableware and purchasing low-emission cars as consumer obligations, and regulating the use of related resources while imposing responsibilities and restrictions on consumers, can often lead to conformity. In some cases, consumers may experience conflict with group opinions and actions. Companies can promote consumption by advertising to reference groups, using peer pressure among group members to enhance the effectiveness of their advertising campaigns. To better manage environmentally friendly products, the government needs to support and regulate the green consumption market at a macro level, which can boost consumer confidence and strengthen their intention to engage in green consumption.

Given the current situation in China, where consumer awareness of environmental consumption is relatively low, it is suggested that various sectors of society actively guide and educate consumers on environmentally responsible behavior. Under the social context of cultivating environmental consumption concepts, the lack of effective regulation of green products has hindered the development of green consumption in China. Therefore, strengthening the role of consumer associations and enhancing government regulation are two key approaches to promoting the development of green consumption. Furthermore, tax incentives can also be used to encourage green consumption among consumers.

4.2. Promoting Green Consumption through Informational Influence

4.2.1. Multi-Channel Information Dissemination

Most companies can vigorously promote green consumption concepts and introduce green products through various channels. By leveraging communities, families, schools, and other avenues, companies can strengthen the promotion and advocacy of green consumption. Through information exchange, companies can provide consumers with a comprehensive understanding of the quality, functionality, and price of goods or services, thereby enhancing consumers' perceived value and increasing their intention to engage in green consumption. Companies can also increase green consumption advocacy in areas like shopping centers, as consumers with higher levels of education tend to favor green consumption. Additionally, companies can use advertisements to target and educate consumers, particularly in higher education institutions. Social organizations should also play a guiding role, utilizing public opinion to lead and promote green consumption activities.

4.2.2. Enhancing Product Quality

Currently, green consumption in China is primarily constrained by "supply limitations" and lacks effective channels for green product distribution. Relevant authorities can strengthen the certification

and promotion of green products, ensuring that they possess high stability and quality, thereby attracting more consumers. Government-promoted "green consumption" concepts can be leveraged to guide individuals through specialized services toward green consumption. Due to an underdeveloped market supervision system, many consumers cannot fully distinguish what constitutes a green product, which necessitates companies to intensify green product education for consumers.

4.2.3. Delivering Effective Information

For green products, companies should actively engage in information promotion and dissemination. Research indicates that consumers' purchase intentions are determined by their perceived value, the information they receive, and their confidence in their own judgment. A major factor influencing green consumption behavior is the weak green consumption awareness among consumers. Efforts should be made to increase the intensity of green consumption advocacy and public green consumption practices. Therefore, companies can invite public figures with positive influence to endorse and market green products. This strategy allows consumers to be swayed by the informational influence of reference groups, as they receive messages conveyed by their favorite public figures. Consumers are likely to imitate the consumption patterns of groups they aspire to, thereby aligning their intentions with those of the desired group and fostering their green consumption concepts.

Moreover, companies should aim to meet the diverse needs of consumers by focusing more on the practicality and content of products. By emphasizing the advantages of their products and leveraging the influence of product information, companies can drive consumers toward green consumption.

4.3. Promoting Green Consumption through Value-Expressive Influence

4.3.1. Setting Reasonable Scenarios

Companies can efficiently identify the actual needs of consumers and integrate the green concepts they wish to convey with specific scenarios that consumers can easily understand. This approach allows the successful communication of green ideas to consumers by using rational information to alter the value perceptions of consumers, thereby enhancing green consumption intentions among Chinese residents. For example, promoting green consumption through public service advertisements can encourage individuals to adopt green consumption habits. Additionally, companies can employ embedded advertising to cultivate consumers' awareness of green consumption. Embedded advertisements involve conveying green consumption messages through scenario reenactment or by integrating them into stories, thereby strengthening consumers' understanding of green consumption concepts. At the same time, celebrities featured in novels can resonate with consumers, who may extend their admiration for the characters to the green consumption ideas they promote. Furthermore, companies can utilize the informational effect to enhance the emotional value consumers associate with green products, thereby increasing their purchase intentions.

4.3.2. Creating a Green Consumption Social Atmosphere

Research has shown that if consumers perceive their behavior as having a significant impact on the ecosystem they inhabit, they are more likely to develop a willingness to engage in green consumption. In this context, companies not only need to convey green information to consumers but also make them aware that their consumption behavior has a real impact on environmental protection. Moreover, companies should use market strategies to communicate the important message that green consumption benefits not only the environment but also individual social welfare. This dual benefit can motivate consumers to engage in green consumption. By employing marketing techniques, companies can foster a broader social momentum for green consumption, thereby enhancing the value-driven influence of social reference groups on consumers' green purchasing intentions.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this paper analyzes the impact of reference groups on consumer behavior in the context of new media and proposes various strategies to enhance green consumption. Value-expressive

influence, informational influence, and utilitarian influence are all crucial means of promoting green consumption among consumers. These methods not only help to raise awareness of environmental protection and enhance understanding of green products, but also contribute to the sustainable development of the economy. By leveraging these influences, it is possible to foster stronger green consumption behaviors, thereby ensuring both environmental and economic benefits.

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