Beyond the behavior-impact gap

Maria Csutora, Ph.D
Corvinus University of Budapest
Background of the study

• Research question: “How much of a reduction in ecological footprint can be achieved through voluntary action”


• Follow-up: New York Times online
Presentation outline

1. Description of the survey
2. Definition and reasons for the behavior-impact gap
3. Good policy examples
Awareness gaps

• Studies suggest that there exists a gap between environmental awareness components (Zsóka, 2009) **Consumers with high level of environmental awareness may not act sustainably.** (Sanne, 2003), (Gatersleben et al. 2002; Thøgersen and Grønhøj 2010), Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002), Thøgersen, JCP 2005)

• According to Sanne (2002) **consumers are locked into unsustainable lifestyles** (e.g. by social norms), even though they are not necessarily willing and happy to act this way.

• **But** sometimes, even with these barriers, people do act on their environmental awareness and we generally assume that doing so **will lead to reduced ecological impact.** So this gets to the heart of my research.
The BIG question…

- Does action by green consumers have a beneficial environmental impact as compared to actions by brown consumers? How much is this impact?
The BIG question…

• Is there a big impact? We can rely on awareness raising policy campaigns.
The BIG question...

• Is there a small impact? Change in the policy is needed.

Then, It will require systemic change in regulations, etc. and production and infrastructure changes.
Hypothesis of the study

“Green” consumers have lower footprint than uninterested consumers of similar income.
Survey

- 1012 respondents, representative survey of Hungarian residents
- Adult population
- Lead by Corvinus University of Budapest
- Used one of the most acknowledged opinion poll institutions

Questions:
- For ecological footprint components
- Pro-environmental behavior
- Life satisfaction
- Demographic questions
Definition of “green” and “brown” consumers

PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL BEHAVIOUR (EUROBAROMETER QUESTIONS):

- Chose an environmentally friendly way of traveling
- Reduced consumption of disposable items
- Separated most of their waste for recycling
- Cut down on water consumption
- Cut down on energy consumption
- Bought environmentally friendly products marked with an environmental label
- Chose locally produced products or groceries
- Used car less

zero activity: brown
21.5%

1-3 activities: average
56.9%

4 or more activities: green
21.6%
Measuring ecological footprint

Detailed questions on major items (based on previous studies)
- Diet
- Energy bill (electricity, heating)
- Detailed questions on mobility

Spending structure in case of minor items

- Footprint was calculated using EF values from the Global Footprint Network national accounts
- Consistency with national consumption was checked
Survey finding

No significant difference was found between the ecological footprint of green and brown consumers.
A BIG problem is confronted whenever the required behavioural change is achieved, but the observed ecological effect is minor or missing.

**Behavior-impact gap**

- **The observed level of pro-environmental behaviour**
- **The level of ecological impacts**
- **Expected level of impacts**
- **Observed level of impacts**
- **Behaviour-Impact-Gap**
- **Contextual factors**
- **Interfering behaviour**
Reasons for the behavior impact gap.

- Offset by increased use of high footprint items (Imported exotic organic food may not be better environmental choice than non-organic local food).
- Contextual factors beyond the competence and influence of consumers (market demand and supply, infrastructure)
- Misleading market segmentation (eco-labeled products)
Reasons for the behavior impact gap.

- Chose easy-to-do but marginal actions in the target field
- Interfering behavior (Over-enthusiasm in separating waste, accompanied by rare enthusiasm in buying articles made from recycled material)
- Rebound effect
CONCLUSIONS

• Pro-environmental behaviour was coupled with only a small reduction in ecological footprint in specific areas.

• More emphasis should be placed on communicating the ecological consequences of consumption habits.

• Re-structuring of the socio-economic determinants of life, including the culture of consumption, is necessary.

• There is still a place for individual action. One can be a green dot below the regression line, even though most people would not do the same
Beyond the behavior-impact gap

Focus on “big impacts”

- Communicate frankly about the sacrifice needed
- Prevent rebound effect (pricing)
- Monitor impacts, not just behavior
- Regulation and infrastructure are essential

Making an impact
Biggest impacts

Food: Too much food, too much meat, wasting) 42% of footprint in my study

Energy: Heating and cooling, electricity: 18%

Mobility: 14%
Good examples: regulation with big impact

- EU building codes
  - Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD) requires Member States to ensure that by 2021 all new buildings are so-called 'nearly zero-energy buildings (passive houses)
  - Phasing out incandescent bulbs
Healthy diet supports the environment – double dividend in diet amendments

Carbon emission

Too much food or too much meat

Obesity Health problems

Too much food or too much meat leads to obesity and health problems.
Stop wasting

- Formally fruits and vegetables that looked different were not allowed to be marketed. “Straight cucumber” standards seem ridiculous during crises time.

- "Cucumber Regulation" (EEC No 1677/88) and the "Carrot Regulation" (EEC No 730/1999) set EU-wide quality standards

- 2009. phasing out of minimum EU standards for 26 types of fruit and veg

Reducing consumption is essential

- Energy: reinventing physical work, e.g. “Garden fitness” as an alternative to jogging

- Stop freezing in the summer and sweating in the winter

- Increasing longevity of goods, slow fashion, slow tourism

- Long term planning is essential for mobility
I gratefully acknowledge the TÁMOP-4.2.1/B-09/1/KMR-2010-0005 project for financing this research and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and the HU0056 project for making their survey data available for this study.