

**Climate Change Consumer Activists:
Objectives, Beliefs and Behaviors**

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Nearly one third of Americans are engaged in climate change consumer activism, defined here as considering the climate policies of companies when making purchases, and regularly discussing the environmental impacts of products and foods. In this study, we investigate the precursors to climate consumer activism, focusing on key climate change beliefs, including risk and efficacy perceptions; issue involvement; and two activist objectives: to consume only environmentally-friendly, sustainable products, and to promote social change by influencing corporate and public behavior. These constructs are used to build a structural equation model that predicts sustainable consumption behavior and opinion leadership. Implications for campaign design are discussed.

Rationale: In the U.S., climate consumer activism is far more common than political activism. In the spring of 2012, 33 percent of Americans responding to a nationally representative survey said they had rewarded companies taking steps to reduce global warming by buying their products, and 36 percent said they occasionally or often discussed products' environmental impacts with others; in contrast, only 8 percent said they'd contacted a legislator in support of action to reduce global warming over the prior year, and 15 percent said they'd donated time and/or money to organizations working on the issue (Authors, 2012).

Consumer activism may be more common than political activism because it is contextually supported and therefore requires less effort; i.e., most people frequently make purchases, often with other people, which provides opportunities to discuss products and companies. Political activities, by contrast, are not part of daily, regular routines. Some research suggests that consumer activism arises from the same motivations as political activism – to

promote social change – and that it is understood by participants as a form of collective action – one option in a toolbox of activist behaviors (Simon, 2011; Willis & Schor, 2012).

Because Americans are more likely to take action in the marketplace than the political arena, this tendency should be probed: Deeper understanding of the beliefs and objectives of people who engage in sustainable consumption, and who attempt to influence others to do the same, may provide an opportunity to advance theory, while also generating insights for consumer activism campaigns.

Constructs & Hypotheses: We hypothesized that consumer activism has two dimensions – *sustainable consumption* and *opinion leadership* – generated by two related objectives: *to purchase only sustainable products*; and *to promote social change* by educating the public and influencing corporate behavior.

These objectives were hypothesized to arise from climate change *issue involvement* and *key beliefs*, previously shown to be precursors to political activism (Authors, 2014): climate change is real, human-caused, harmful, and solvable; the *injunctive belief* that citizens should take action; and *response efficacy* – the belief that the respondent's own actions can influence corporations.

We anticipated that social change objectives would be strongly predictive of opinion leadership, while sustainable consumption objectives would strongly predict consumption behavior.

Methods: Nationally representative survey data gathered in 2012 by GfK Knowledge Networks were used to construct a structural equation model explaining sustainable consumption behavior and opinion leadership (see Figure 1). The data were gathered online, from a sample randomly selected from a 55,000-member panel, recruited through address-based sampling and

random digit-dialing. The 20-minute survey focused on climate-relevant beliefs and behaviors (N=1,045; completion rate=47%).

Results: Key beliefs – that climate change is real, human-caused, harmful and solvable – were strongly predictive of both issue involvement ($R^2=.82$) and the injunctive belief that citizens should do more to reduce global warming ($R^2=.52$).

Issue involvement, injunctive beliefs, response efficacy and gender (female) explained 40% of the variance in sustainable consumption objectives; issue involvement and response efficacy also predicted social change objectives, as did several demographics (older, female, with less education and income; $R^2=.38$). Curiously, the injunctive belief that citizens should be doing more to reduce global warming did not predict social change objectives. Also of note was respondents' low response efficacy: 72 percent said their actions influenced companies "not at all" or "only a little," and only 5 percent said their actions influenced companies "a lot."

Sustainable consumption behavior and opinion leadership were predicted by both types of objective, explaining 44 percent of the variance in consumption, and 33 percent in opinion leadership. Demographics did not predict opinion leadership, but sustainable consumption behavior was higher among males with more education and income.

The two objectives were highly correlated ($r=.58$), as were the two activism behavioral dimensions ($r=.94$). The latter were, in fact, so highly correlated that they could have been collapsed into a single latent variable; we retained two constructs, however, because they are conceptually distinct.

Implications: The model suggests several messaging strategies to foster consumer activism. First, response efficacy – the belief that companies are responsive to consumers – is low. Because it is a strong predictor of both forms of motivation, increasing people's sense that

companies will respond to their actions could increase their motivations to act. Successful examples of consumer activism could help strengthen this belief.

Second, the injunctive belief that citizens should be doing more to reduce global warming was not related to social change objectives. Logically, these two should be related – believing people should take action should provide motivation to educate others and encourage them to act. The fact that the two were not related suggests that campaigns should highlight the inconsistency; i.e., messages could point to the individual's responsibility for promoting the social changes they already support.

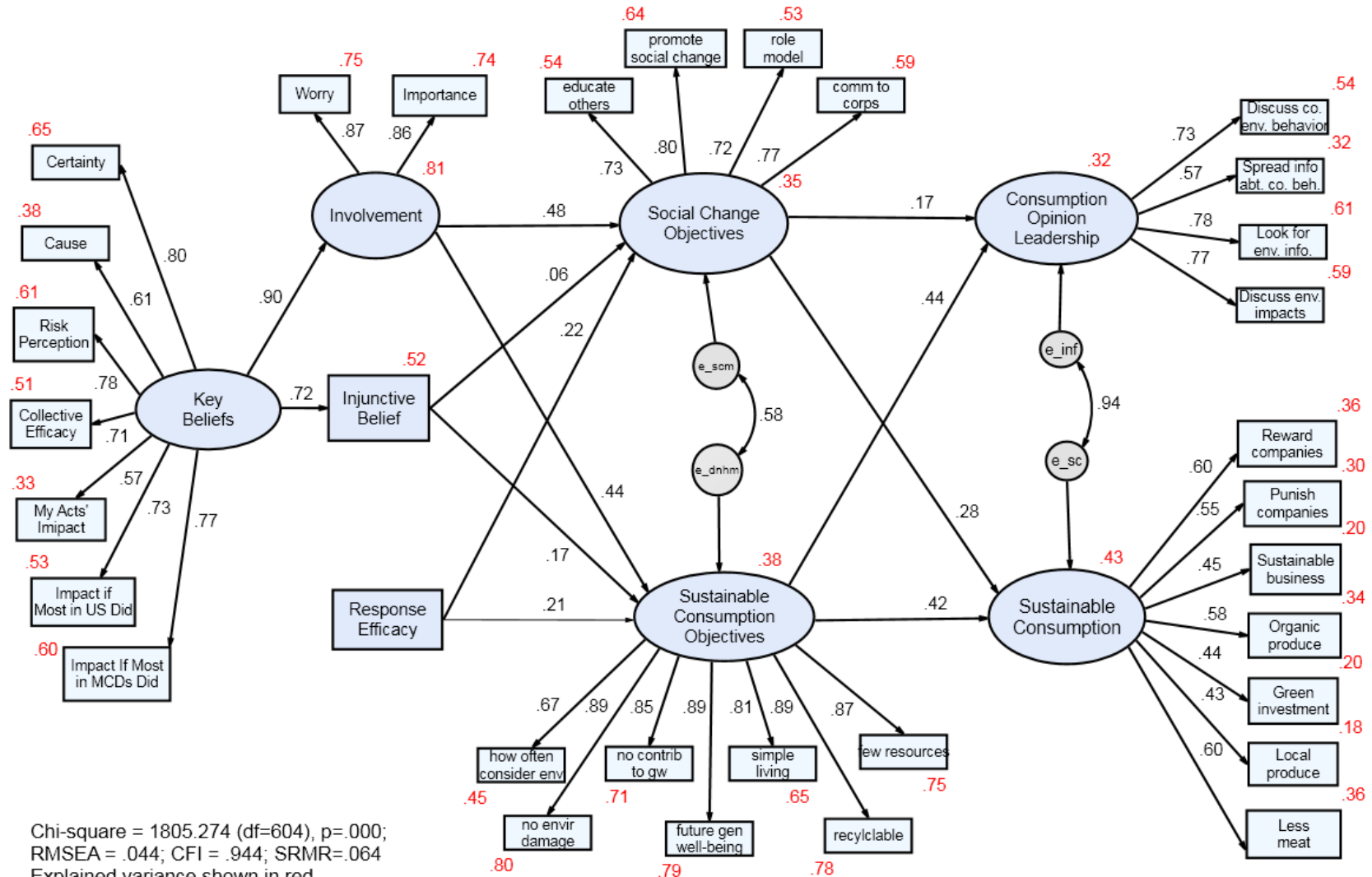
Third, the link between social change objectives and opinion leadership was weaker than anticipated: those who said they wish to influence others were not as likely to be acting on their motivation as we might expect. Helping potential activists understand the strength of interpersonal influence may increase their opinion leadership.

Finally, although opinion leadership and personal consumption appear conceptually distinct, they are almost indistinguishable quantitatively. The primary difference is that demographics predict the latter but not the former, suggesting that consumer activism may be a unitary construct, but that some indicators of the construct – sustainable purchases – require greater resources, while leadership is open to anyone.

References

- Simon, B. (2011). Not going to Starbucks: Boycotts and the out-scouring of politics in the branded world. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 11*(2), 145-167.
- Willis, M. M., & Schor, J. B. (2012). Does changing a light bulb lead to changing the world? Political action and the conscious consumer. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 644*(1), 160-190.

Figure 1: Beliefs and Objectives of Climate Change Consumer Activists



Chi-square = 1805.274 (df=604), p=.000;
 RMSEA = .044; CFI = .944; SRMR=.064
 Explained variance shown in red
 Demographic controls not shown