

Sustainability paradigm: perspective of the small retailers

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Abstract

The preponderance of academic research examines sustainable behaviour of large US retailers, while research of small retailers in the United States (US) who make a significant contribution to the US economy and collectively have a major impact the natural environment has garnered little attention. Therefore, this study fills a gap in the literature by examining key business decisions as to environment, ecology, and economy. As a key member of the value chain, small retailer in the United States' attitudes toward the built environment, stakeholder pressures, and green marketing decisions are examined. This exploratory study provides important development steps in creating validated measures including the built environment, environmental assessment, economic decision, and supplier/distributor decision behaviours.

Keywords: small retailers, built environment, scale development, triple bottom line, environment, economic, ecology.

1 Introduction

The 21st Century arrived with many of the same environmental concerns and debates that have been around for decades; however, in the United States (US) consumers entered the 21st Century more environmentally informed than ever before. Thanks to advances in technology, increasing numbers of US citizens have access to a greater quantity and quality of information about their impact on the environment. Information as to diseases borne out of environmental contaminants (e.g., Asthma and Mesothelioma) and various products' (e.g., tin) links to environmental degradation are no longer invisible to the consuming public (WebMD Inc. [1]). The voice of the environmentally conscience as well as economically concerned citizens in the United States grows continually (Ottman *et al.* [2]). Coupled with consumers' demand for change, increasing costs of natural resources and demand of many resources exceeding supply the



business focus as to the environmental concerns of the past are today's business problems that can no longer ignore (Hirshberg [3]).

From a holistic and integrated perspective, it is realized that the behavior of businesses (large or small) has great potential to harm or improve the natural environment and while impacting the world economy. Humans are not passive units of production and in the natural environment humans are co-creative insiders. Claims made in the late 20th Century that preservation of the ecology and the natural environment are economically sound business decisions requires addressing in earnest to garner profitability for all parties including the eco system. Previous research shows that "saving the planet" is a winning proposition for companies as well as the environment (Hirshberg [3]). According to Mintel/Environmental Business International Inc. [4], in spite of the recession, by 2011 more than 29% of respondents from an online survey of 2000 respondents over the age of 18 from across the continuous United States reported that they are purchasing more environmentally friendly products in spite of the costs (SC Johnson [5]).

The retail industry has grown globally with retail revenues above \$14.4 trillion in 2008 up 3% from 2003 to 2007 and expected growth to \$20 trillion by 2020 (Euromonitor [6]). Discerning retailers, to be truly green (economically and environmentally), are holistically addressing the 3Es (ecology, environment, and economy) and not taking a Newtonian view of the 3Es as mutually exclusive. Thus, it is more than merely selling *green* products; retailers must also make *green* decisions for the betterment of society and their business.

Best known for their greenness are the big-box US retailers such as Wal-Mart. Nevertheless, the small US retailers account for 40% of all retail sales and provide jobs for around eight million people (approximately 55% of all jobs and 66% of new jobs since the 1970s) managements' collective decisions as to environmental sustainability have a significant impact on the 3Es. Almost 95% of all retailers have only one store outlet in the US and thus small retailers make up most of the retailing industry (Independent Retailer [7]). There are multiple retail footprints (1,067,984 in 2010) on US soil of which 1,041,996 (97.6%) are the footprints of many small retailers (<100 employees) (SBA.gov [8]) and thus their collective impact on the built environment warrants research into the attitudes and behaviors of small retailer.

To create a sense of clarity, the built environment and its scope must be operationalized in order to understand the level of impact on the built environment possible from multiple small retail establishments. The built environment includes *land use patterns, transportation systems, and design features that together provide opportunities for travel and physical activity* (Transportation Research Board Institute of Medicine of the National Academies [9]). The current study focuses on the creation of scales to measure the small retailers' attitudes and behavioral choices within the design aspect of the built environment. More specifically, the scales are designed to examine the attitudes towards toward decisions that impact the 3Es including economic, promotional choices, natural resource behaviors, and value chain relationship decisions.



Further, scales have been created to measure the impact of stakeholders on the small retailers' decisions as to engaging in activities that influence the 3Es. Stakeholder pressure on US retailers (e.g., special interest groups, customers, consumers, community members) to conduct their business in an environmentally sustainable manner and to offer environmentally friendly products continues to increase. Because of their size and numbers, retailers have been marked by their impact on the environment and have come under government regulations, pressure from the media and consumers to demonstrate that they care about the environment. According to a 2008 survey for the National Retail Federations seventy-two percent of retailers surveyed admitted that customer demand is the number one reason for change over other stakeholder pressure (National Retail Federation [10]). Consumers for decades have demonstrated the desire to align themselves, even piggyback on the goodness of others (Zinkhan and Carlson [11]). Therefore, a significant economic benefit for the *green utopian* company (i.e., all members of the supply chain addressing the 3Es at the same level) is to strategically address the expectations of a *greening* society to gain a unique competitive advantage through implementation of best practices in environmental and fiscal sustainability that is difficult and arduous for competitors to replicate (Kotler and Keller [12]). Therefore, the scales designed to measure the propositions in this study of small retailers' perceptions of the needed level of response (e.g., stocking and marketing of sustainable products, and alignment with likeminded value chain members) to stakeholders' pressure for environmentally responsible behavior were created. When addressing a changing retail environment, retailers' choices impact the design aspect of the built environment (such as location – traffic to and within the retail facility, egress and ingress, parking; store atmospherics; and materials handling – transportation, and resource lifecycle).

Some retailers have been recognized for their role as environmentally responsible citizens thus creating a differential competitive advantage (i.e., offering consumers something unique and valuable other than lower prices than competitors) (e.g., Wal-Mart 2007) over their less environmentally conscientious competitors (Smith [13]). For example, in 2007, the Chief Executive Officer of Wal-Mart put the world's largest retail on a path toward sustainability and by 2009 his successor recognize the need to go beyond the walls of Wal-Mart and to reach across Wal-Mart's suppliers around the world (Allen *et al.* [14]). Much of this change may be a result of the negative publicity Wal-Mart received over the years in many Michael Moore's productions and popular press.

With the 3Es as the company's focus, success involves significant efforts in aligning with like-minded, self-regulating value chain members in order to create and maintain satisfaction, loyalty, and trust (Phillips *et al.* [15]). Further, decisions within the value chain such as product liability, material usage and resource choices, lifecycle considerations, and eco-efficiency are aligned among members. From a profitability viewpoint with the demand chain in mind, sustainability decisions are weighed against standards, costs, and resource availability for product conceptualization, product development, and supply chain and manufacturing process decisions. Taking this integrative approach



necessitates tying short-term behavior decisions to long-term corporate profitability and environmental sustainability.

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In spite of the upward trend in environmentally conscious consumers, the US population is one of the most skeptical in the world as to environmental issues such as pollution (GFK Group [17]). That very consumers' skepticism derived from inadequate or incorrect information as to what are truly environmentally sustainable products, green companies, and the green product's true benefits has resulted in the terminology *green washing*. Green washing is perceived as manufacturers, retailers, marketers, and other profit making organizations feigning green to make a profit (Green Eco Communities [18]). *Green washing* risks the continued depletion of vital resources to the points of scarcity or obsolescence. Thus, marketing's role in the *greening* of the United States' product markets has been a two-edged sword. By providing the consuming public with information about the benefits of *green* products or of the value chain members' (i.e., demand and supply chain) *green* behavior it has been productive in moving consumers up in the green spectrum where more and more consumers are making personal efforts to be *green*; however, abusive behavior (e.g., false claims) has made believability of claims questionable (Grant [19]). Deceptive *green* advertising (i.e., intentional act or state of mind of the agent) and/or misleading advertising (i.e., lack of intention of deceiving) have are equally confusing to the consumer and thus consumers' desire to engage in goodness of deeds is often overshadowed by skepticism fostered by *green washing* along with assignment of responsibility to the speaker (advertiser/retailer) (Attas [20]). It is the assignment of blame that can be costly to the retailer. It is also unfortunate that green washing has caused consumers to hold ambivalent attitudes (i.e., simultaneously holding positive and negative evaluations) toward products labeled as *green* or *environmentally friendly* fearing that the products may be inferior products of low quality even though they help save the planet (Chang [21]). Consumers may see these products as less effective, or one that requires more in terms of the amount used or effort expended, and/or costs more than non-green products and as a product that is likely being marketed as a *green* product in order to make a sale (Stafford [22]).



When marketers tout products as *true green* that are only a pale shade of green, if that, it also harms environmental efforts by creating skepticism and doubt that leads to poor purchasing decision which potentially affects the green retailer and his or her future environmental decisions. When retailers utilizing deceptive marketing tactics, products wrapped in *green* rhetoric and/or claims of one's greenness the deceptive behavior negatively impact the 3Es for all stakeholders. Consumers' skepticism cannot be changed without truth in advertising that clearly reveals the product's quality, green features, and value chain members' green processes from start to finish. However, advertising budgets are typically less than 5% of gross sales of retailers; thus, are limited necessitating using a well-planned strategic marketing campaign (SBA.gov [8]) that alone without clearly visible holistic environmentally sustainable behaviors on the part of the small retailer may truly be a waste of marketing dollars and do more harm. See the appendices for scale items that measure advertising decisions made by small retailers. Arguably, a holistic approach conceptually assumes internal processes are sustainable. Thus, this study examines the attitudes and behaviors of the US small retailer toward both internal sustainability practices (i.e., environmental assessments, economic and *green* marketing decisions) and sustainable decisions behavior based on external pressures (e.g., built environment and value chain) as they influence the 3Es.

2 Theoretical foundation, relevant literature and propositions

Small retailers with a limited advertising budget may have difficulty overcoming consumer ambivalent attitudes toward their greenness unless they strategically market using a holistic approach to environmental sustainability that includes alignment with likeminded value chain members. Whenever possible, the retailer must take a holistic approach to sustainability including aligning with suppliers and distributors who also keep future generations' needs in mind in all phase of the business. The built environment is impacted the act of extraction of raw materials, manufacturing, and product handling (e.g. fuel efficient transportation, limit distance traveled by materials, limit resources needed to process the raw materials, construction materials for containers used in transport must be sustainable, etc.), as well as sales of final products. Successful retailing of green products means managements' embracing a cradle-to-cradle mentality for which long and short-term sustainable decisions cycle continuously through feedback loops of knowledge acquisition, process development through production /product improvements.

The triple bottom line is the notion of corporate accountability and reporting the value of an organization based on the concept of integrated economic, environmental, and social activities (Savitz and Weber [23]). The 3Es – economic (economy) – profitability; environmental (environment) – air quality, water quality, energy usage, waste produced; and social (economy, ecology and environmental) – impact of retailers' sustainable decisions on the community as described by Hirshberg [3] in his 2008 book *Stirring It Up: How to Make Money and Save the World* adapt well to the triple bottom line concept.



For an organization to succeed over the long run, it must be financially sound and take steps to minimize negative environmental and ecological impacts while behaving in a manner that conforms to societal norms. Adopting the stewardship principle (i.e., an obligation of management to see all stakeholders benefit from a company's actions) by voluntarily engaging in sustainability efforts wherever possible address the 3Es satisfying the criteria for the triple bottom-line (Elkington [24]). Overall, there is little academic research on the interface between sustainability defined by the triple bottom line and small retailers. Therefore, based on existing literature.

P₁: The majority of small retailers do not actively engage in activities that support a triple bottom line.

The question as to level of influence of the environmentally sustainable behavior of retailers' influence on consumers' purchasing behavior have been addressed to some extent by researching large retailers (e.g., Wal-Mart), leaving small retailers' behaviors within the built environment virtually unknown (Allen *et al.* [14]). Understanding the behavior of the small retailer is paramount when viewing the retail industry holistically as the small retailers collectively hold the most potential for the largest physical footprint in their industry (SBA.gov [25]). Nevertheless, opportunities to gain ecological and environmental sustainability may not resonate with a small retailer whose ownership believes in the single (economic) bottom line only. The single bottom line philosophy may be true for small retailers, at least in the first five years of business, because of the need to financially survive the first five years in business. In the US, 50% of small businesses (e.g., retailers) go out of business (Longley [26]).

P₂: The majority of small retailers in business less than five years believe that only the big retailers can afford to be environmentally sustainable.

Many companies recognize the threat of public pressure and/or the cost of government regulations; and, make strategic changes wherever possible. Research has shown that big retailers have taken action to demonstrate their commitment to the green movement. A growing number of consumers want to feel, to varying degrees that the choices they make ultimately matter (Ottman *et al.* [2]). Companies have responded to this need by developing, producing, and marketing more environmentally friendly products. In big box stores (e.g., Wal-Mart) and pharmacies and on nearly every aisle in many retail establishments in the US there are products with claims of being green, natural, or sustainable. In every product category from baby supplies to vitamins to business-to-business there are more green products than ever before (Lewis *et al.* [27]). However, unethical corporate behavior such as misrepresentation or deceptive practices by marketers as to levels of environmental sustainability of products or processes are cogs in the wheel of sustainability that impede forward momentum of the drive toward green utopian consumption. In the areas of advertising and promotion resides the greatest possibility for green sheening to harm the movement toward a sustainable planet and environmentally sustainable companies' profitability. Sadly, green washing has washed over consumers through bombardments with faux green images creating more uncertainty than answers (Green Eco Communities [18]). If retailers believe consumers'

perceptions are jaded because of bad marketing behavior, then retailers with limited advertising budgets may avoid spending money on ads making environmental sustainability claims. Due to the lack of research as to small retailers' sustainability behaviors, the following is hypothesized on research surrounding small retailers' business behaviors:

P₃: Management of small retailers react to pressure from various stakeholder groups to be environmentally sustainable.

Retailers play a pivotal role in the supply chain as the direct link to the consumer. Retailers in the US today have the ability to dictate to suppliers their own environmental requirements for the products that go onto their shelves or selecting suppliers that act in environmentally sustainable ways (Lewis *et al.* [27]). Yet, the cost to check and re-check supply chain members' behaviors may seem financially prohibitive and inevitably must be passed on to the consumer. Choosing the right supply chain members and developing a level of trust between members is important as carefully managing supply chain members may be too costly for small retailers. Value chain best practices required careful choices of chain member partnerships, building relationships with chain members, and developing trust across the entire chain. With the 3Es as the company's focus, success involves significant efforts in aligning with like-minded, self-regulating value chain members in order to create and maintain satisfaction, loyalty, and trust (Phillips *et al.* [15]). However, academic research is silent as to whether the small retailer has the power or resources to dictate to their suppliers; therefore, the following is proposed based on an academic study in 2012 by Jay Hamister that found that moderate levels of supply chain management were reported by the small retailers in study. This is an indicator that small retailers are for the most part not truly engaged in making supply chain decisions and are depending on availability not ability of supply chain providers (Hamister [28]).

P₄: Management of small retailers in the US does not believe they have the power to dictate environmentally sustainable behaviors from their suppliers.

Companies striving for a green utopian state, develop environmental policies for operating company facilities, and set green standards for the company and their supply chain partners. Taking this integrative approach necessitates tying short-term behavior decisions to long-term corporate profitability and environmental sustainability in an end-to-end approach (Closs *et al.* [16]). For the retailers this may be all but impossible; however, efforts to be sustainable and sell a number of environmentally sustainable products are possible for many retailers.

The concept of sustainability for modern living must consider issues within and without buildings for which design is one element (Gray and Jasuja [29]). Design taken together with location of the establishment has an impact on transportation to and from supply chain members and consumers; thus, has a great impact on sustainability that one retailer sets a chain of sustainable options in place for the betterment of society as a whole. Therefore, even a small retailer who may feel overwhelmingly an inability to create any significant impact on the



environment due to their small size and limited resources, in fact, can make a significant impact. In order to be able to market authentic 'green' many companies are striving to increase their "triple bottom line" in this age of accountability with stakeholders not just stockholders by capturing the essence of sustainability through the measuring of the impact of their organization's overall environmental footprint on the world (Savitz and Weber [23]). Certifications as to sustainability are commonplace in the US. As to third party certifications as to environmental sustainability, these certifications help reduce consumer confusion and add value to the brand by aligning with legitimate and widely recognized third party certification companies (International Institute for Sustainable Development [30]). However, many companies self-regulate through the use of environmental management systems (EMS) to manage both strategic and operational decisions as to environmental integration and accountability (Sarkis and Sroufe [31]). Self-regulation may be the only viable option for small retailers due to costs involved with third party certifications. Third party costs vary in direct costs for small businesses depending on the type of certification but typically are thousands of dollars; however, the larger portion comes from indirect costs such as consultancy fees (CTDA [32]). In the sustainability movement, self-regulation has developed, but is limited to a few specific industries (e.g. chemical industry, nuclear power, international maritime) (Lennox [33]). As well, many of the self-regulating industry organization are not well-structure and appear to add little to no value to a company who gains the certification, mostly because the standards are not well-established and/or recognized; but also because the costs are higher than many organization can afford and because the consuming public does not recognize many of these organization as legitimate. However, Green Seal, located in Washington, DC, is an organization based on scientific research (i.e., sustainability product life cycle assessment) in the formulation of standards. Green Seal has been in business for 20 years and writing sustainability standards for 18 years. According to Dr Baldwin of Green Seal, the standards application within many industries has moved incrementally upward in demand only in the last five years. In industries such as professional cleaning products and building products, the industry demand for sustainability (e.g., US Green Building Council and state legislated purchasing regulations) has pulled sustainability compliance to forefront (Baldwin [34]). Therefore, scales were designed to measure the following proposition.

- P₅: The majority of small retailers periodically measure their own level of sustainability, as external agencies are perceived to be too costly.

3 Methodology

3.1 Scale development

In order to accurately measure the concepts proposed in this study, a survey instrument was created for purification with a small sample of business owners. The researchers carefully developed questions relevant to each of the constructs



in the study based on expert judges in the field. The descriptive survey consists of 36 quantitative questions. No demographic information is included as all respondents are identified as meeting the criteria of this study as being a small retailer (independently owned retailers with <100 employees).

The survey was designed as a subjective self-report instrument developed specifically for the retail industry that may, however, reflect response bias unless steps are taken such as guarantee of anonymity are implemented. The use of self-report scales is theoretically sound, because many of the decisions to engage in environmentally sustainable behavior are psychological in nature and involve attitudes and emotions known only to the person surveyed (Spector and Jex [35]). All purified measures must demonstrate good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha statistics of $> .70$ (Hair *et al.* [36]). Validity (e.g. content, criterion, discriminant, convergent) must be examined.

3.1.1 Attitude toward the triple bottom line scale

The proposed attitude scale is a multidimensional (i.e., ecology, environment and economic) seven-point Likert scale consisting of nine items. Higher (lower) scores represent higher (lower) strength of the retailers' attitude toward the triple bottom line. See appendices for scale items.

3.1.2 Perceptions of retailers' ability to be environmentally sustainable scale

This scale is operationally defined as a unidimensional construct that measures the retailers' perception of their ability to financially afford to engage in environmentally sustainable behavior. This is a seven-point Likert scale consisting of four items. Higher (lower) scores represent higher (lower) levels of perceived ability of the small retailer to financially engage in environmentally sustainable behavior.

3.1.3 Perception of stakeholder pressure scale

This scale is operationally defined as a unidimensional construct that measures small retailers' perception of the need to respond stakeholder pressures as to environmental decisions internal to the retail establishment. This scale is a seven-point Likert scale containing nine (9) items. Higher (lower) scores represent higher (lower) levels of perceived influence of stakeholder pressure on retailers' environmental decisions.

3.1.4 Supplier/distribution decision behavior scale

Supplier/distributor decision behavior is operationally defined as one's ability to influence decisions surrounding supply chain member behavior. This unidimensional measure is a seven-point, Likert scale containing six (6) items. Higher (lower) scores represent higher (lower) levels of perceived ability to influence decisions surrounding supply chain members.

3.1.5 Environmental assessment behavior scale

This scale is operationally defined as engagement in environmental assessment directly related to the retail establishment. This unidimensional measure is a



seven-point, Likert scale containing three (3) items. Higher (lower) scores represent higher (lower) levels of perceived impact on the built environment by small retailers' sustainability decisions to engage in environmental assessments.

3.2 Other relevant variables

As a check to the legitimacy of the answers to the survey, participants are asked to report their most expensive utility bill as well as the average cost in summer and winter. In the State of Georgia, where this study will be conducted, summer rates are nearly twice as much for electricity as they are in the winter months. As well, the cost of electricity is typically greater for most retailers than other utilities as lights are on and heating and/or air conditioning for extended periods of time.

3.3 Validity

Content validity demonstrates the adequacy with which the measures assess the domain of interest. In designing the scales for this study, the constructs were presented to expert judges in the field to determine content validity. Other forms of validity will be examined after data collection. The research team is in the process of collecting data to pilot test (100+ respondents) the survey instrument for validity and reliability. The pilot test will be used to inform the propositions in the study prior to determining directionality of hypothesized relationships. An exploratory factor analysis, scale reliability, and validity check will be implemented prior to administering the study across a large sample.

4 Conclusions

In the absence of existing scales, this study describes the process of scale development for the propositions in this paper. These scales are designed specifically to measure the propositions in this study. These scales will be tested for validity and reliability on a small sample prior to implementing the full study.

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