Am I Just a Drop in the Ocean? The Power of Individual Actions and Choices in Mitigating Climate Change

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Podcast Episode Description

Join us as we dive into a topic that concerns us all: The Power of Individual Proenvironmental Actions and Choices. In this episode, we'll unpack academic concepts and competing arguments, interwoven with real-world case studies on climate change, consumption, and marketing. Tune in now! Gain knowledge and have fun!

Script

Hello, and welcome to this episode of the podcast 'Debating Marketing & Climate Change'. I'm your host, Star. Today, we're diving into a thought-provoking topic that many of us have probably asked ourselves: Am I a drop in the ocean? Do the actions and choices of an individual consumer matter in mitigating climate change?

Let's get into it! Over the decades, the world has increasingly experienced climate change, a phenomenon that has been proven to be largely attributed to human activities (Funsho Idowu et al., 2022). In recent years, public awareness of environmental protection has increased (Vasiljevic-Shikaleska et al., 2018). We all know it's time to make changes and take action.

But let's be real, when you're standing in front of a shelf packed with products, wondering if picking the eco-friendly option even makes a difference, it's easy to feel like your choice doesn't really matter in the grand scheme of things. Or maybe you've thought, 'why bother recycling when big corporations are the real problem?' And then, after all that back-and-forth in your head, you end up skipping the greener choice anyway. As revealed by research, while most consumers demonstrate strong pro-environmental values and positive attitudes towards sustainable consumption, their actual habits frequently remain unchanged, resulting in the 'attitude-behavior gap' (Echegaray and Hansstein, 2017; Nguyen, Nguyen and Hoang, 2018; Ronda, 2024). This phenomenon could stem from obstacles in structural, social, informational, economic, and psychological factors (Lorenzoni, Nicholson-Cole and Whitmarsh, 2007; Whitmarsh and O'Neill, 2010).

So, how can we encourage consumers to act in pro-environmental ways? One effective approach is to convince individuals that their actions matter. However, research showed that individuals often overestimate the impact of certain actions while neglecting others that deserve more attention, or lack information about the relative contribution of each action to climate change (Bleys et al., 2018).

Now, let's talk about how individual actions can have a positive impact, starting with the direct impact of high-impact actions, including having one fewer child, living car free, avoiding air travel, and adopting a plant-based diet. These actions could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 0.8 to 4 tonnes per person per year. For instance, adopting a plant-based diet reduces

emissions eight times more than upgrading to energy-efficient light bulbs (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017).

Although these high-impact actions can indeed have a significantly positive impact on climate change, they are challenging to put into practice due to ingrained habits.

In contrast, moderate-impact actions like reusing, recycling and reducing food waste, as well as low-impact actions like conserving water and planting a tree (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017), are easier to implement. Although their impact is not as obvious, they still contribute meaningfully to climate mitigation.

You think that's all there is? No. The impact of individual actions goes far beyond direct effects. Most of us have probably heard of the 'butterfly effect', which suggests that small shifts can give rise to far-reaching and unpredictable impacts (Lorenz, 1972).

One powerful indirect effect is behavioral contagion, where individuals rely on cues from others to determine their actions. For example, one study indicated that individuals with social connections to vegetarians or vegans tend to consume less meat compared to those without such social ties (Vandermoere et al., 2019). This exemplifies the role of 'social norms' in shaping behavior, which sets out beliefs about what is socially appropriate and acceptable (White, Habib and Hardisty, 2019). 'Social norms' are especially influential in complex issues like climate change, because individuals rely more on social norms as cognitive shortcuts when they face uncertainty or limited knowledge (Sparkman, Howe and Walton, 2021).

The resulting collective action is powerful. Imagine this: you decide to stop buying single-use plastic water bottles. Great! But if a million people do the same, suddenly companies notice. They see a drop in sales, and they start thinking, 'Hmm, maybe we should offer more sustainable options'.

A great example is the plastic straw movement. Remember when everyone started refusing plastic straws? It started with just a few individuals, but it quickly became a global trend. Companies like Starbucks and McDonald's responded by phasing out plastic straws entirely (Saulsbery, 2018; Translated by ContentEngine LLC, 2020). This is the power of collective action!

That is to say, consumers' choices and actions send a signal to businesses and policymakers that there's demand for sustainable options, which may have the potential to drive significant change, pushing corporations and organizations to adopt greener practices, such as Unilever's commitment to halving its use of virgin plastics by 2025 (Unilever to halve virgin plastics use by 2025, 2020). Take the rise of plant-based diets, a few years ago, eating vegan was seen as kind of niche. But as more people start choosing plant-based options, it became more mainstream, and businesses are expanding their offerings of vegan products (Nelson, 2020). And now, with the soaring demand, big fast-food chains like KFC, Burger King and McDonald's are offering more vegan options. Even Starbucks Corporation is joining the movement with non-dairy milk (Pattnaik, 2022).

Social media platforms further amplify individual actions, empowering consumers to mobilize and advocate for change on a global scale (Tufekci, 2017). Hashtags like 'ZeroWaste' and 'SustainableLiving' have fostered communities of individuals who inspire each other to make better choices.

So, while you might feel like a drop in the ocean, remember that ocean is made of drops. Your actions can ripple out and create waves of change.

So far, we've talked a lot about positive impacts of individual actions and choices on the environment, and it seems like individual actions are much more impactful than we think?

This is true, but individual actions face some limitations.

Among them, the often-mentioned 'direct rebound effect' refers to the situation where the improvement of energy efficiency makes energy services cheaper, which in turn leads consumers to increase their consumption of these services. This effect offsets the energysaving effect that could have been achieved. For example, after purchasing a clean energy electric vehicle, consumers may choose to drive farther and/or more frequently because of the reduced operating cost per kilometer (Sorrell, Dimitropoulos and Sommerville, 2009).

Besides, structural obstacles, such as corporate power and political inaction, tend to blunt the impact of consumer efforts (Klein, 2014).

What' more, let's look at a pretty straightforward data, according to the 'Carbon Majors' report in 2017, since 1988, merely 100 companies have been responsible for 70% of global greenhouse gas emissions (Valle, 2018). What a shocking figure! It is often used to defend the view that companies, rather than individuals, are the only actors capable of truly mitigating climate change.

However, when examining the composition behind this statistic closely, a striking revelation emerges: over 90% of these 70% emissions are actually generated by us consumers. This means a significant portion of corporate emissions stems from producing goods for human consumption. We must recognize that markets are driven by consumption, not production. The ultimate purpose of corporations is to provide products and services to consumers. To put it bluntly: if we stopped buying products from companies like ExxonMobil, they would go bankrupt. Current realities already demonstrate the decline of this industry. This shows that unsustainable individual consumption exacerbates climate change, while simultaneously proving that personal actions can catalyze solutions—aligning with the earlier-mentioned view that individual behavior drives systemic change (Lloyd, 2020).

We must acknowledge the importance of individual consumption choices and actions, and recognize their potential as catalysts for social changes. Yet this does not absolve political, corporate, or organizational leaders of their responsibility to mitigate climate change. This is not an either/or scenario—we need both. Individual actions can spur demand for social changes, while social changes can make sustainable choices more accessible to individuals.

In fact, this logic aligns with the operational approach of non-governmental organizations. Greenpeace, one of the world's most prominent environmental organizations, released a report detailing the impacts of meat consumption on climate change and human health. While urging individual consumers to reduce meat consumption, this report simultaneously demanded that policymakers end subsidies to the meat and dairy industries (Greenpeace International, 2018).

Therefore, while individual actions matter profoundly, they constitute only one piece of the puzzle. Without social change, individual efforts alone might seem insufficient in the face of large-scale environmental issues. Both individual efforts and social changes are indispensable.

We need governments and corporations to jointly shoulder responsibility, collaborating to mitigate climate change and forge a sustainable future.

Okay, so let's go back to the original question, 'Am I merely a drop in the ocean?' Yes, probably, You're just one person. But your actions are far from insignificant, not just because of their direct impact, but because they can shape social norms and further form a great collective power that may drive major change. What's more, social media platforms can further amplify individual actions. So, as the saying goes, 'The ocean is made up of drops'. Together, we can create a wave of change. However, to truly address global environmental challenges, it is essential to combine individual efforts with social changes at the government, corporate, and institutional levels.

That's all for today. Thanks for tuning in to this episode of 'Debating Marketing & Climate Change'. If you enjoy our podcast, please subscribe and share it with your friends. If you're willing, feel free to leave a comment and interact with us! Until next time, stay curious and keep making a difference! Remember, every drop counts!

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