Black Sea Journal of Management and Marketing

Volume 1, Issue 1 | August, 2020 | e-ISSN: 2667-9426 | DOI: 10.47299/bsjmm.v1i1

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Black Sea Journal of Management and Marketing (BSJMM) is a refereed journal that envisions to be a scientific station for academic people and practitioners who are interested in finding out solutions to managerial and marketing challenges impacting the public. The journal endeavors to publish high-quality scholarly papers not only from the authors from the Black Sea region but also from all around the world.

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DOI: 10.47299/bsjmm.v1i1.29

Citation guide (APA7):

Abdulla, N., Wrya, H., & Durmaz, O. (2020). Green product perception in Kurdistan Region of Iraq. *Black Sea Journal of Management and Marketing*, 1(1), 1-15. doi:10.47299/bsjmm.v1i1.29

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ISSN 2667-9426

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Green Product Perception in Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

Increasing awareness on different environmental issues has driven a shift in the way consumers go about their lives. There has been a change in consumer's state of mind toward a green lifestyle. People are effectively attempting to reduce their negative effect on the environment, but not to a great extent and yet to evolve. Organizations and businesses, however, have seen this change in consumer's state of mind and are attempting to pick up an edge within the competitive market by exploiting the potential in the green market industry. The current study introduces the concept of green marketing and looks into the various ways in which different consumer attributes are related to the concept of green marketing. A conceptual framework is presented and the information is analyzed on the basis of the framework.

Keywords: Green marketing, green products, consumer awareness of green, Kurdistan, Iraq

Introduction

Human consumption has caused a great impact on the physical environment and this has resulted in an increase of concerns about energy consumption, pollution, deforestation, and the like. That is because of the change of consumers' lifestyles and their perception of environmental responsibility. In 1970, when the earth day first was established, there was no agency for environmental protection, no clean air act, or clean water act, but now there are thousands of different environmental groups playing crucial roles in sharing environmental awareness and millions of people take part in Earth Day across the globe (Gibbens, 2018).

Therefore, the demand for environmentally friendly products known as green products has remarkably increased due to the environmental awareness of people who have been changing their consumption behavior (Jang et al., 2011; Ozmen et al., 2013). A consumer whose purchasing behavior is persuaded by environmental concerns is known as a green consumer (Shrum et al. 1995). Besides, Ottman and Books (1998) defined green product as not poisonous, not harmful to humans and the environment and easy recycled materials of products that are not used anymore. Further, a 'green product' is referred to these types of products that environmentally friendly, organic, and has natural ingredients (Demir & Mukhlis,

2017; Khan, 2020). Furthermore, green marketing is related to different activities, such as creating an eco-friendly product, efficient packing and shipping methods adopting sustainable business practices, and environmental safety products (Demir et al., 2014; Polonsky 1994).

Moreover, green marketing includes a product or service that is environmentally friendly itself as well as being produced in a sustainable way and not harmful to the environment (Jang et al., 2011). This may include avoiding toxic materials in the product, the use of recycled materials in the product, and cut expenses and transportation in the product (Budur, 2018b; Shrum et al., 1995). In this concept, green awareness impacts humans conduct in a few different ways: lessening utilization, changing inefficient or destructive utilization examples and raising inclination for naturally agreeable items, particular waste assortment, or various types of dissent that may represent environmental reasonableness (Junior et al., 2018; Kanchanapibul et al., 2014).

Following these further, nowadays those consumers who favor green products try to reduce the usage of those products that are harmful for people and cause pollution in the atmosphere as well as the environment. In addition, businesses are struggling to find new ways to develop environmentally friendly products to attract these customers (Kianpour et al., 2014).

Green products communicate the level of awareness of consumers about eco-benefits and foster social responsibility to consider environmental sensibility (Zinkhan & Carlson, 1995). Besides, scholars noted the advantages of going green in the management and businesses as increased brand awareness in the market (Demir, 2019a), increased competitiveness (Demir, 2019b; Budur, 2018; Mohammed et al., 2020), socially responsible actions for society (Budur & Demir, 2019a, b), healthier work environment (Demir et al., 2019, 2020), effectiveness in planning processes (Demir & Budur, 2019; Torlak et al., 2019; Zaim et al., 2020), new financial opportunities (Budur et al., 2018, 2019), and productivity in the work place (Mohammed & Sahin, 2020; Rashid, 2014).

In this concept, this study aims to examine the perception of consumers in the Kurdistan region about their environmental concerns, customer green product awareness, and the sensibility against green price and brand image. Accordingly, Kurdistan is a growing market in the region (Budur & Poturak, 2020), especially after several economic and political crises (Budur & Poturak, 2021) after which foreign investors are trying to increase their activities in the region (Demir & Bulut, 2018; Khan & Yildiz, 2020). Thus, the perception of the customers is very important to foster environmentally friendly activities of the firms to survive in the market. Consequently, the current paper makes contributions in the following:

- i. To determine customer awareness about environmentally friendly products;
- ii. To measure perceptions of consumers towards environmentally friendly products;
- iii. To investigate whether demographic factors influence customer awareness, perception, and buying behaviors of environmentally friendly products.

Literature review

Consumers' Environmental Concerns

Consumers who are concerned about the environment are emotionally involved in environmental protection. In addition, they get inspired by the idea that encourages them to care about the well-being of the planet and its inhabitants (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Environmental concern, empathy and concern about ecological issues at various levels urge them to be environmentally friendly and lead them to shift

their purchase patterns towards green products (Kilbourne & Pickett, 2008). Environmental concern is a general approach that demonstrates the degree of customer uncertainty and insecurity over threats to the equilibrium of nature and the lack of presence of the required human behavior when talking over planned generations (Bohlen, Schlegelmilch & Diamantopoulos, 1993).

Green marketing

Green marketing was proposed and defined for the first time in a seminar about ecological marketing organized by American Marketing Association in 1975. According to this definition, green marketing has been defined as positive or negative effects of marketing activities on environmental pollution, energy consumption and the consumption of other sources (Onurlubas, 2016). Besides, Polonsky (1994:5) defined green marketing as satisfying the needs of people by harming the environment the least. Abid & Latif (2015) defined it as the production of goods in accordance with the environmental protection principles.

Majority of the people think that green marketing refers to the promotion or advertising of products with environmental characteristics (Kumar et al., 2012). Some terms like phosphate free, recyclable, refillable, and ozone friendly and environment friendly are some of these concepts that consumers most often associate with green marketing. In fact, these terms are green marketing claims. In general, green marketing is a broader concept that can be applied to consumer goods and industrial goods and services (Polonsky, 1994).

Awareness of Green Product

The core idea of green product is to make mindfulness among people on the ecological issues and the way that consumers help and support the environment (Onurlubas, 2016). Thus, the awareness of green product provides more information to people to switch over to a green way of life (Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015). Further, awareness of green product, in fact, comea from those people who care and pay attention to the environment issues (Ansari et al., 2019). In addition, awareness of green is defined by Renfro (2010) as the people who support and take care of those businesses and organizations that actually environmentally friendly and trade in a green manner.

Awareness of Green Pricing

Many consumers are worried about natural wellbeing, some about their own wellbeing or health as well as the expenses. Cost is an urgent factor when the ability to pay a premium for a green product is concerned - there is a lesser brand awareness attention to 'eco-friendly' (Pandey & Shukla, 2002). Therefore, the intentions of consumers to buy green products can depend on specific components like the cost of a product and the accessibility of the product (Bayiz Ahmad et al., 2019). The expectations to buy a green product can also change if the buyer understands that the 'green' title of the item has been misleading, dubious or false (Hadi et al., 2018).

Research Methodology

Materials and Methods

In this study, we have collected data via an online survey tool offered to young people. Two hundred respondents returned the questionnaires. Data collection was conducted through a five-month period

(1 February - 31 June 2020) utilizing convenient sampling technique. Responses were randomly drawn from students in a public university and a private university in different cities in Kurdistan Iraq. Their participation was purely voluntary. They were required to complete the questionnaire designed in the form of structured close-ended questions in different sections. Section A was related to the demographics of the respondents. Section B gathered the experience of the respondents on green marketing. Section C asked the respondents about their perceptions on environmental concerns, awareness of green products, price, brand image, consumer purchasing decisions, personal attitudes, behavioral control and subjective attitudes. The responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Consequently, regression, correlation, and covariance analyses have been performed to test the relationship between the variables.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the descriptive investigation on demographic profile of respondents. The final sample of the research consists of 146 responses. It has been observed that the majority of the respondents was male (65%) and the rest female (35%). Besides, 63% of the participants were undergraduates, 33% graduates, and 4% post-secondary. It means that the majority of the participants have a good educational background. Moreover, out of 146 participants 89% of them are single and 11% married. Table 1 shows the details about the demographic information of the sample population.

Table 1

Demographic information about sample population of the study

AGE	Number	Percentage
17-21	55	38%
22-26	74	51%
27-31	7	5%
Over 32	9	6%
GENDER	Number	Percentage
Male	94	65%
Female	51	35%
EDUCATION	Number	Percentage
undergraduate	93	63%
graduate degree	47	33%
other (post-secondary)	5	4%

Analysis of Responses to the Questionnaire Items

Figure 1

Responses to: "Environmental issues are urgent" (142 responses)

Figure 1 is related to consumers' environmental concerns. The majority of the respondents agree that environmental issues in Kurdistan are urgent (38%). 31.7% of the respondents, the second-highest rate of selection, strongly agree that the environmental issues are important. 25.4% of the respondents remained neutral whereas very few of the participants disagree or strongly disagree that environmental issues are not urgent ones (around 5%).

Figure 2

Responses to: "Environmental Issues Are Consumer's Responsibility" (142 responses)

Figure 2 is about the consumer responsibility about environmental issues. We can understand that the most of the respondents agree / strongly agree that consumers are responsible about environmental issues (around 31% for both), which sums up to ~60%. Besides that, 26.8% of the respondents remained neutral to the statement. Finally, as we can see from the pie chart, only 8.5% of respondents disagree which represents a lower degree compared to those who pay attention to the environmental issues. 2.1% of the respondents strongly disagree to the statement, which forms a very poor result compared to the others.

Figure 3 explains the importance of saving food products by less packaging waste. We can conclude that the participants generally agreed to reducing the amount of food wasted and the packaging costs are crucial: 33% of the respondents strongly agree and 37% agree that reducing negative environmental impact by less packaging is very important (especially for reasons of reduced health and bad odor produced with food disposal).

Figure 3

Responses to: "I wish to see less packaging waste generated by processed food products" (140 responses)

Figure 3 explains the importance of saving food products by less packaging waste. We can conclude that the participants generally agreed to reducing the amount of food wasted and the packaging costs are crucial: 33% of the respondents strongly agree and 37% agree that reducing negative environmental impact by less packaging is very important (especially for reasons of reduced health and bad odor produced with food disposal).

Moreover 20% of the participants became neutral. 5.7% of the participants disagree and 4.3% of them strongly disagree to the idea of seeing less packaging generated by processed food products.

Figure 4

Responses to: "I am worried about how all my activities affect the environment" (140 responses)

Figure 4 illustrates the level of anxiety about the human activities that affect the environment. 64.3% of the participants believe that their activities are important in protecting the environment: 25% strongly agree and 39.3% of participants agree to the idea. However, around 9% of the respondents either disagree or strongly disagree which means they do not believe that their individual activities have a bad effect on the environment.

With the statement in Figure 5, we wanted to know about peoples' perspective of what companies are producing. The chart explains the opinions of respondents for this matter. 35% of the participants choose to be 'neutral' not to say anything about this question. The second largest majority is 32.9% who disagree with the notion of companies making environmentally friendly products available. On the other hand, 15% think that companies play a positive role in making some environmentally friendly products while 13.6% strongly agree with that. Finally, the rest of participants strongly disagree that companies are working on developing environmentally products.

Figure 5

Responses to: "Companies develop and make available some environment friendly products" (140 responses)

Figure 6

Responses to: "By buying a green product, I indirectly influence the environmental protection" (140 responses)

Figure 6 explains that buying and using eco-friendly products are better for the environment as they are made of recycled material which reduces the consumption of scarce resources and tells the companies not only focus on their financial goals but also meeting environmental goals. According to the results, 19.3% of respondents strongly agree to buying green products in order to positively influence environmental protection. Moreover, 43.6% agree to the statement which composes the highest rate out in the questionnaire. Besides, we can conclude that 26.4% think that buying and using eco-friendly products indirectly influence environmental protection by remaining neutral. Finally, only 11% strongly disagree and disagree in total. It can, therefore, be argued that most of the participants agree to the statement.

Increasingly, consumers are becoming more knowledgeable about the environment and reflecting this knowledge in their decisions to buy green products. This fact will directly increase the production of green products, upgrade the company's focus and increase production of eco-friendly products. The chart in Figure 7 proves that producing green products will eventually increase. 25.5% of the participants strongly agree to it and almost 48% agree to increasing green products. Only 7.8% of the respondents disagree.

Figure 7

Responses to: "If consumers keep purchasing green products, green production will eventually increase" (141 responses)

Figure 8

Responses to: "Green products usually come smaller in portion but higher in price" (141 responses)

Eco-friendly products are generally more expensive than the regular products we find in the market these days. The demand for eco-friendly products is on the rise whereas the demand for traditional toxic products is decreasing. The production of eco-friendly products will therefore increase and toxic products will decrease. This will result in a wider range of choices for green products over non-green products. Figure 8 shows that 15% of the respondents strongly agree and 41% of them agree that green products are higher in prices and smaller in size. 32% of the participants remained neutral. 7.8% disagree and only 2.8% of participants strongly disagree that green products usually come smaller in size but higher in price.

Figure 9

Responses to: "I am more likely to buy products that are packaged in an eco-friendly manner and made easy for recycling or composting" (140 responses)

Many companies are looking to go green with their packaging nowadays. Eco-packaging simply requires fewer materials which is more sustainable and gives better results. According to the results, 27% strongly agree and 37% participants agree to the statement, which represents a high rate of responses. Moreover, 28% were not sure about it, and only 7% of the respondents disagree to it.

Figure 10

Responses to: "I would choose environmentally friendly goods and services if the price were the same" (137 responses)

Figure 10 shows prospective green customers for environmentally friendly goods and services if the prices were close to the regular products: 28.5% of the participants strongly agree to choosing green goods and services while 32.8% of them agree, 30% are neutral and almost 8% disagree.

Figure 11

Responses to: "If the green products are less expensive I am willing to change my lifestyle by purchasing green products" (138 responses)

Green products have become popular and been targeted by consumers who lead a green lifestyle. The statement attempts to find out if pricing plays an important role in consumers' decisions. Based on Figure 11, we can conclude that there is an obvious willingness to purchase green products if pricing is not an issue. 26% of the participants strongly agree and 37% agree to purchasing green products and change their lifestyle if they are not expensive. 28% are not sure. Almost 8% of the participants disagree, which means they are not going to change their lifestyle even if the environmentally friendly products are competitively priced.

Figure 12

Responses to: "I feel more comfortable buying products from a brand that has a green image" (138 responses)

Green marketing refers to the process of promoting products and/or services based on their environmental benefits. Besides, brands with green reputation can urge some consumers to be more comfortable and highly willing to buy their products. Figure 12 explains the perceptions of the participants about the issue: 40% of them agree that a green image has greater impact on consumers' feelings to be more comfortable and willing in buying the products. Moreover, 17% strongly agree to the idea whereas 31% of them are not sure about it. A very low rate of participants does not agree.

Figure 13

Responses to: "I am aware that a strong brand image gives me confidence toward their green product" (136 responses)

A strong brand image in customers' perceptions can have an important role in influencing them to be involved more with the brand's green products and services. Development of green brand image is crucial for those companies that produce green products. The chart in Figure 13 show the level of awareness of the participants about brands' images and the level of confidence toward their green products. 37.5% of participants agree that a strong brand image can provide confidence toward green products. 37% remained neutral. Moreover, 15% of the participants disagree to the statement, which means that a strong brand image cannot provide confidence about a green product of a particular brand.

An innovative and new image of a green product created by some companies tend to attract consumers in going green and increase willingness to purchase eco-friendly products. Companies should improve the image of their green products and services in order to attract and maintain loyal green consumers. Figure 14 indicates that 42% of the respondents agree that the new image of eco-friendly products by some companies attract consumers in going green. Besides, 13% strongly agree that the image of a green product has a significant role in attracting consumers to go green.

Figure 14

Responses to: "Innovative and new image of an eco-friendly product of a company tends to attract consumers in going green" (137 responses)

Moreover, 37% are not sure about the statement. Finally, almost 10% do not agree or strongly disagree. Overall, we can conclude that an innovative and new image offered by companies has a crucial role in attracting consumers to go green.

Figure 15

Responses to: "I choose to buy products that are environmentally friendly" (136 responses)

Environmentally friendly products have a strong influence in consumers' decisions to purchase green. Those people who believe in saving nature and the environment feel more responsible and they are more likely to purchase green products. Figure 15 strongly shows that 39% of the respondents and 26.5% of them strongly agree that they are ready to choose green products because of their environmental concern. Besides, 26.5% of the participants are not sure and they are neutral about the issue. A few of the respondents disagree.

Eco-friendly products are generally more expensive than traditional their counterparts but even then, many people are still ready to pay more to buy green products because they favor recycled materials and environment friendliness to achieve a sustainable lifestyle. For this reason, there is a certain demand for green no matter how expensive they are. Figure 16 shows that 27% of the responds agree to that and 14.6% of the respondents strongly agree. Moreover, the majority of the responds are not sure about that which means that they may not be ready to pay more for expensive products just because they are green and/or eco products. Finally, 20% disagree to buying green products because of the high price.

Figure 16

Responses to: "I buy green products even if they are more expensive than the non-green ones" (137 responses)

Figure 17

Responses to: "I prefer green products than non-green products" (137 responses)

Green products use more organic materials than chemicals which are harmful for the environment and human health. Figure 17 reinforces the idea that consumers would like to purchase green products more than the others with 46% of the participants who agree and 22% strongly agree. However, 25.5% are not sure about whether to go green.

Conclusion

This research elaborates on the consumers' environmental concerns, their level of awareness of green products, price range and brand image, personal attitudes, perceived behavioral control and subjective attitudes on their purchasing decision of green products. From the results, it is interesting to note that consumers' awareness of green products and brand image were important indicators on their purchasing decision. Awareness of green products is the strongest reason that has positively influenced their purchasing decision. This study confirmed that a person who has a certain degree of concern about eco-friendly products and the brand image would have a stronger preference to purchase a green product. In this respect, it is important for marketers to develop awareness of their green products and brand image strategies strategically to encourage increased sales of the products. Needless to say, there is an increased demand for green products in the Kurdistan market.

Marketers should provide clear information about green products and eco-labels to promote consumer familiarization with the products and enhance their knowledge of them. Attractive green product messages should be aggressively developed that would stimulate interest among Generation Y (ages - 26-40). Consumers should easily be able to differentiate green products from the non-green ones based

on the labels. Furthermore, the green products should be affordable to encourage more sales. Governmental and non-governmental organizations play an important role in encouraging consumers to go green and embrace green purchasing behavior. They could demonstrate their involvement and support by expanding consumer awareness of green products through creating effective green marketing campaigns and environment-related activities such as energy conservation to contribute to a better sustainable environment. Marketers on the other hand should play their role to make sure that their products are of high quality and competitively priced. These products should be put on sale with thoughtful green marketing strategies that fulfil individual needs and maximize customer satisfaction.

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