

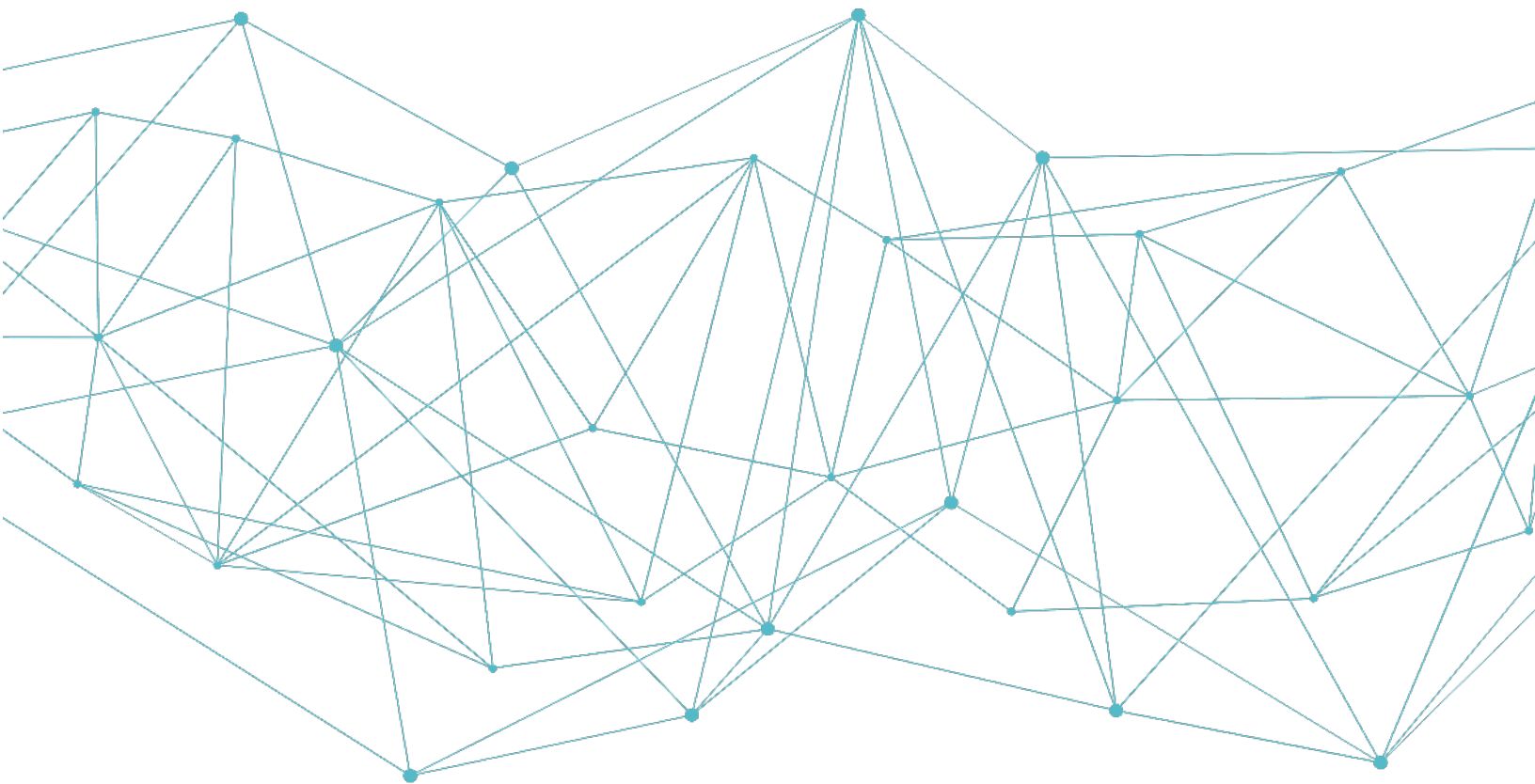


The Cognitive Psychology Behind Eco-Consumerism

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OVERVIEW

What exactly defines the eco-(aka "green") consumer? As the name suggests, eco-consumption is typically conceptualized as a person's frequency of purchasing (or consuming) eco-conscious products.

But is that really all it's about? Our team of scientists and researchers wondered if there were any other common behaviors nestled underneath this unique lifestyle umbrella. Moreover, they also aimed to identify the relevant beliefs and cognitive architecture that served as the foundation and primary motivation for this environmentally-oriented way of life.

SAMPLE & PROCEDURE

A representative sample of the US population (N=7711) was surveyed in August of 2020 about, 1) their beliefs regarding climate change (e.g., real vs. hoax; human-made vs. naturally-occurring), 2) the eco-conscious behaviors they regularly participate in (e.g., recycling, walking or biking instead of driving), 3) their level of connection to the natural world (e.g., "I see myself as part of a unified and evolving ecosystem."), and 4) the frequency with which they purchase environmentally-friendly products. Finally, survey takers were assessed on their overall cognitive flexibility (i.e., mental multi-tasking ability).

Who is an Eco-Consumer?

Typically defined as a person who frequently purchases or consumes eco-conscious products.

Behaviors that define Eco-Consumerism

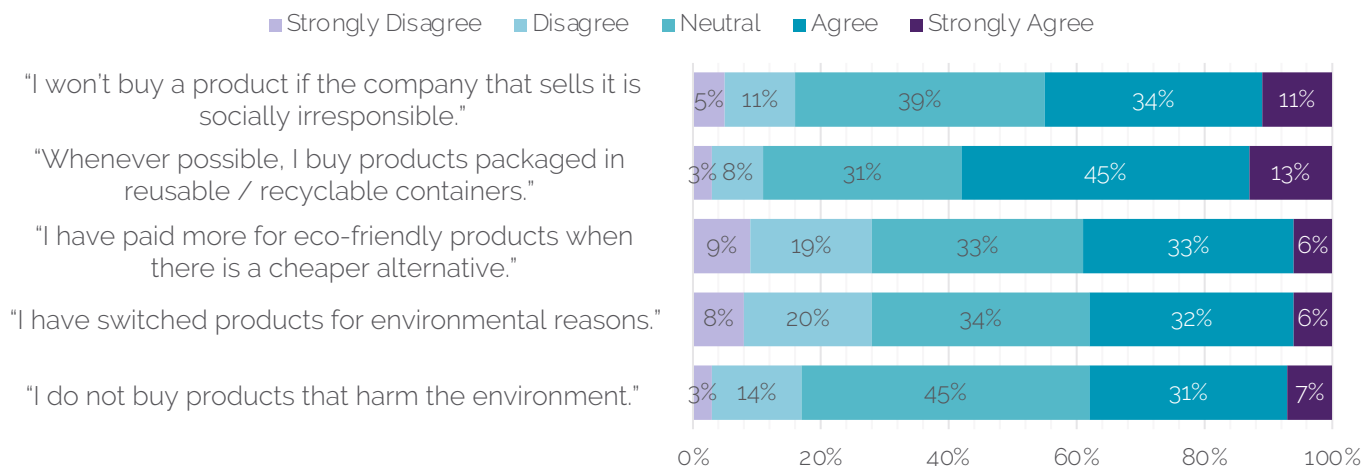


Table 1: Behaviors that define "Eco-Consumerism" - Listed above are a sample of the behaviors that define Eco-Consumerism. Responses to each item were provided on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The percentage of people who identified with each response option within each item are listed.

WHAT IS ECO-CONSUMERISM?

We assessed ten possible behaviors that could contribute to one's overall tendency to be eco-conscious (see Table 1 for a sample of the items included on the survey). These behaviors included things like, spending more on eco-friendly products even if a cheaper alternative was available; switching products or brands for environmental reasons; refusing to purchase products that knowingly harm the environment; preferring products that come in recycled or bio-based packaging; and prioritizing brands who are transparent about their commitment to socially responsible business practices, to name a few.

Taken together, a comprehensive definition of eco-consumerism sounds something like, "the tendency to prioritize environmental wellbeing over personal convenience, and therefore engage in consumerism with social and environmental responsibility as the compass point for all purchases."

WHO IS THE ECO-CONSUMER?

The charts below give us a clear set of characteristics for those who rated highest on our eco-consumer measure. Young, female, persons of color, with a relatively high level of education, and who identify as politically Democrat each had higher eco-consumer scores relative to all other demographic groups (see Charts 1-5).

DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE ECO-CONSUMER

Chart 1: Generation

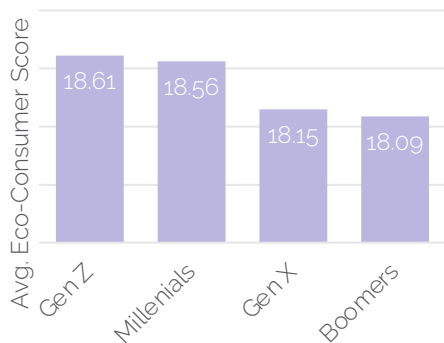


Chart 2: Gender

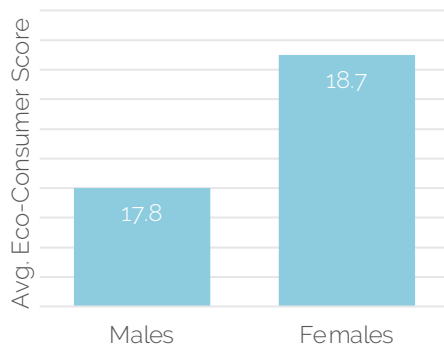


Chart 3: Race

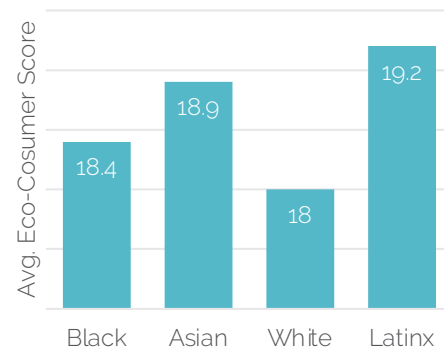


Chart 4: Political Party

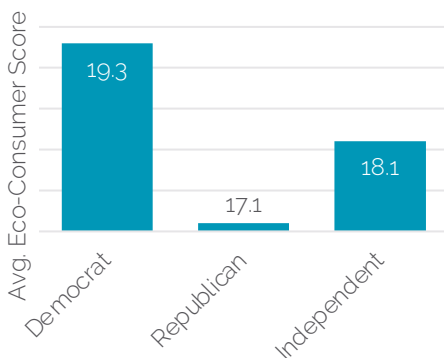
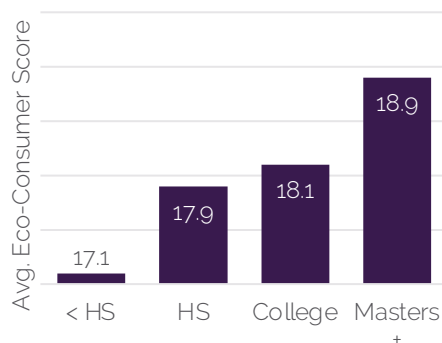


Chart 5: Education

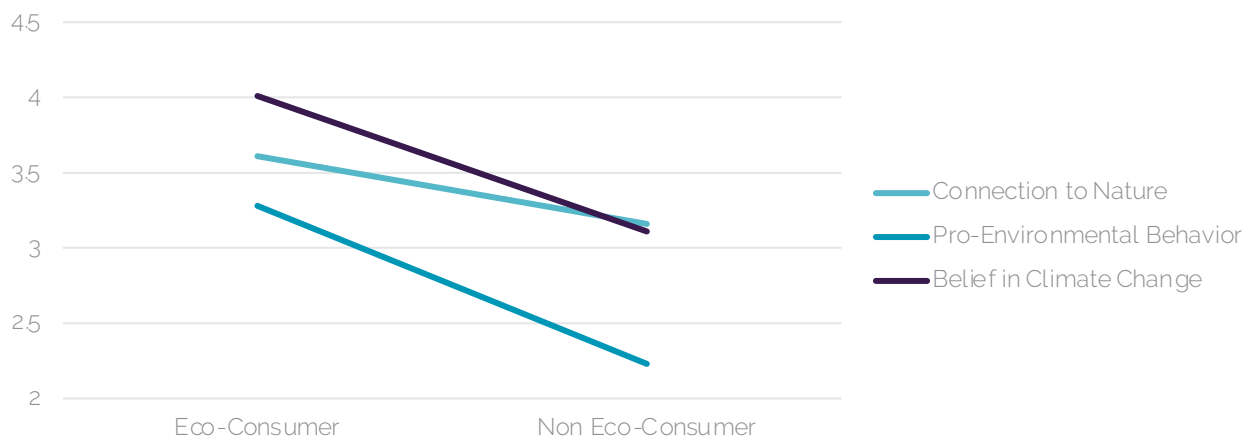


Charts 1-5 : Demographics of the Eco-Consumer - All ten eco-consumer behavior survey items were subjected to a factor analysis, and a subsequent weighted composite score was created. The charts above reflect the average eco-consumer score for each demographic sub-population.

When we examined our other motivational and behavioral indicators, those scoring high (versus low) in eco-consumerism also scored significantly higher in their self-reported 1) connection to nature, 2) belief in climate change, and 3) pro-environmental behavior than their non-eco-conscious counterparts (see Graph 1).

This means that people who tend to make environmentally-oriented purchase decisions, also feel more connected to the natural world, strongly believe that climate change is real (and human-caused), and regularly engage in behaviors that take the wellbeing of the natural world into consideration.

MOTIVATIONAL & BEHAVIORAL INDICATORS



Graph 1 : Motivational and Behavioral Indicators – Each of these three indicators was assessed as a multi-item measure, and scores were calculated as a composite of the total self-reported responses across all items for each indicator. The values you see above, are the average scores for each indicator for survey participants who were deemed “eco consumers” or “non”. Each comparison across Eco and Non-eco consumers are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

So, why is this occurring? And where do we go from here? To answer these questions, we need to begin to consider how people receive and evaluate information, because it is not enough to know how they act and what they believe (though each of these offer us valuable insights). Instead, we need to begin to dive into the way that people process the multitude of information they receive on an ongoing basis, and then assess how they respond once they have that knowledge. Do they accept it? Do they reject it? Do they thoughtfully consider it and potentially incorporate it into their current lifestyle? This set of queries can only be understood by evaluating a person's cognitive flexibility.

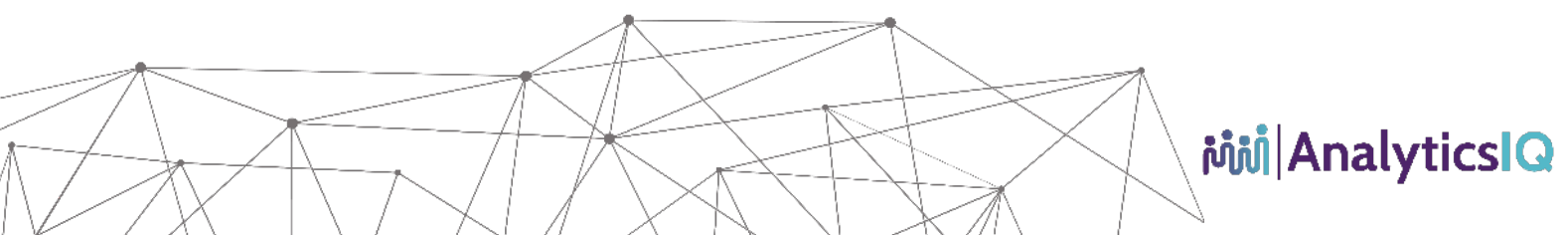
COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY & ECO-CONSUMERISM

Cognitive flexibility is essentially one's ability to accurately and efficiently, mentally multi-task. An example of this might look like holding a running grocery list in mind while simultaneously driving your car to the store and safely following all traffic laws (without forgetting any items on your list). Or, being able to compassionately hold a political conversation with a friend or family member (who holds an opposing viewpoint) where you're able to state your position and rationale while simultaneously listening to their perspective with genuine consideration. These are certainly no easy tasks. Gaining insight into the role that mental-multi-taking (i.e., cognitive flexibility) plays in a person's eco-conscious consumer choices would clarify why the eco-consumer would choose the more difficult and inconvenient lifestyle over the easier and more accessible one.

Consider the following real-life examples:

- Consistently spending more of your hard-earned income to pay for organic foods and products when cheaper alternative are available.
- Spending hours researching your next clothing purchase in order to ascertain the material type and quality, the location of the factory, and whether sweatshop labor was used or not.
- Sticking to a vegan diet when friends or family have traditional dietary habits.
- Biking or walking, rather than driving, when traffic and weather are both inconvenient and undesirable.

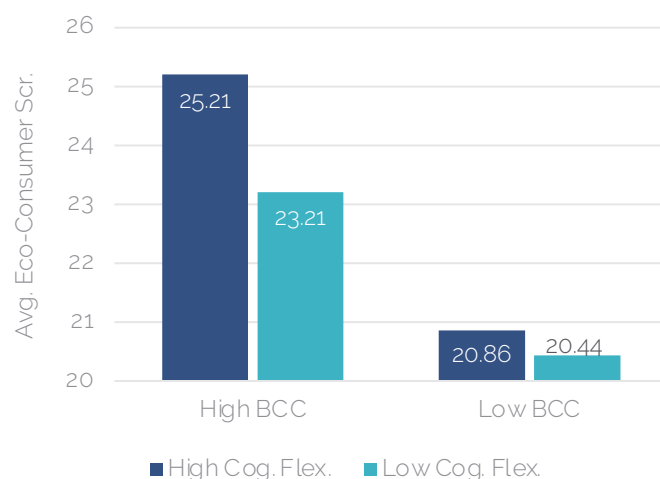
Each of these examples is time-consuming, cumbersome, and generally disadvantageous to an easeful lifestyle. Doing any of them on a regular basis requires patience, discipline, and a significant commitment to the belief that each of these choices matters. All of which collectively add up to something greater than the individual choices themselves - a belief in personal responsibility and perhaps even the feeling that we are each stewards of this planet; tasked with caring for it, nurturing it, and cleaning it up.



Whereas beliefs (like those regarding climate change) are ones that develop over a period of time and through experience and maturation; cognitive flexibility (on the other hand) is akin to a mental hardwiring which is outside of our conscious control. Meaning, that humans do not have the ability to simply decide to change their available cognitive resources or overall mental capacities at any time they desire. In fact, most people are entirely unaware of their mental hardwiring, and yet research demonstrates that these mental reserves are always behind the scenes influencing decisions that require a cost-benefit analysis. Eco-consumerism almost always requires a weighing of environmental benefits over personal conveniences. Therefore, gaining an understanding of one's cognitive flexibility may prove to be a crucial component in our collective history right now and for the environmental future and health of the planet as we create solutions for longevity and prosperity.

PREDICTING ECO-CONSUMERISM

Our final aim of this research was to examine the collective influence of cognitive infrastructure and personal belief-systems on eco-consumerism. Toward that end, an analysis of variance was conducted, and the resulting interaction can be seen in Graph 2 (right). Not surprisingly, people who are high in cognitive flexibility and hold a high belief in climate change score the highest on eco-consumerism, and the people lowest across both predictors have the lowest eco-consumerism scores.

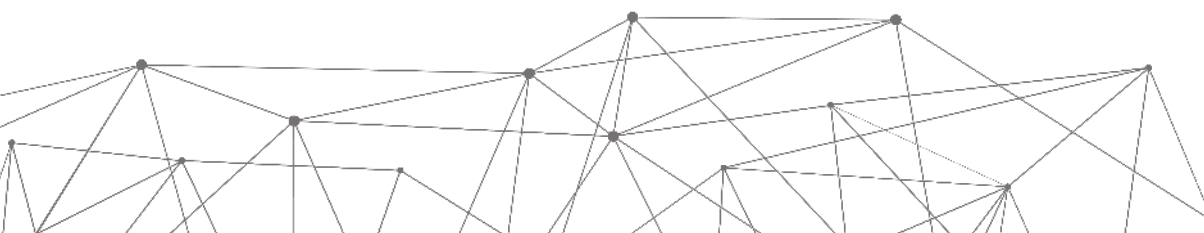


Graph 2 : Interaction of Cognitive Flexibility & Belief in Climate Change on Eco-Consumerism – A 2x2 ANOVA was conducted with cognitive flexibility (high, low) and belief in climate change (high, low) as independent variables, and eco-consumerism as the dependent variable. The interaction and all pairwise comparisons are significant at $p < .01$.

Which means that the people who are the most concerned about climate change and who also have ample cognitive resources to withhold personal conveniences for long-term environmental benefits are most likely to be eco-consumers. Moreover, we anticipated that cognitive flexibility would take would buffer eco-consumer scores when belief in climate change was low, and the data partially support this assertion. Under these circumstances, eco-consumer scores are higher among the low belief people when ample cognitive resources are available.



Most interesting, and counter to our predictions, is that regardless of your implicit cognitive flexibility, if you have a strong belief that climate change is real, then you are significantly more motivated to take personal steps to be part of the solution than low belief people with greater cognitive resources. This suggests that your personal belief systems more steadfastly inform your day-to-day choices and overall lifestyle than your cognitive infrastructure alone.



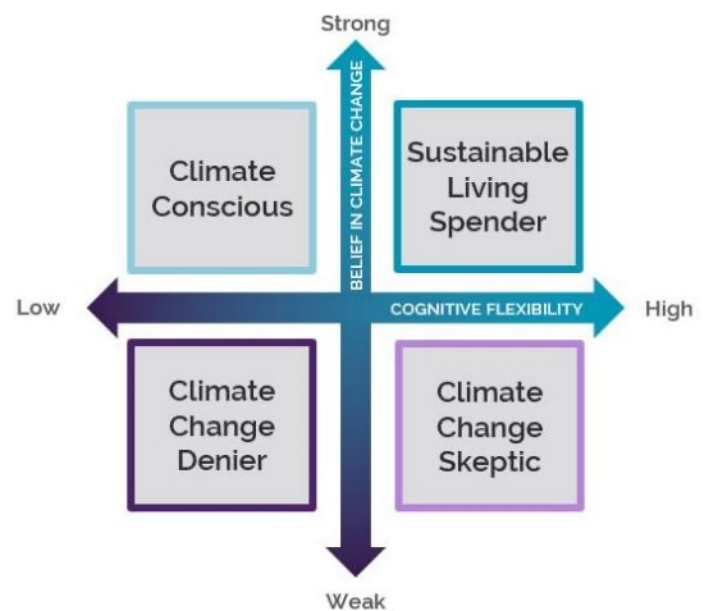
NEXT STEPS FOR MARKETERS

Armed with these research insights, our science and marketing teams then created a reliable segmentation system that delineates four different types of Eco-Consumers (see graphic below). For marketers, the two primary targets to focus on are the Sustainable Living Spenders and Climate Conscious Individuals. The crucial difference between them is going to be the angle and language delivered to each subgroup.

The Sustainable Living Spenders have the mental skillset needed to consistently make eco-conscious choices, and believe this type of lifestyle is advantageous in the long-term. Therefore they will not likely need much convincing of the good of your product. The messaging here should be straightforward, honest, and appeal to long-term solutions.. For the Climate Conscious Individuals, your message should be tailored toward their environmental concern and the importance of their role in climate solutions. Clear and simple reasoning as to

why your product is good for the planet and therefore good for them should be paramount.

The final two segments (Climate Change Skeptics and Climate Change Deniers) are less likely to come into the fold of eco-conscious product purchasing, and future research is needed to determine how malleable these subpopulations truly are. The research team at AnalyticsIQ is currently in process of testing the effectiveness of various messaging campaigns across all four groups.



WHERE CAN YOU GET MORE INFORMATION ON THESE DATA POINTS?

Contact sarahc@analytics-iq.com or go to www.analytics-iq.com.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Cavrak, PhD is a Research Psychologist, and the Senior Director of the Cognitive Sciences Department at AnalyticsIQ, Inc. She has spent 20 years studying the psychological underpinnings of human behavior, and is primarily interested in understanding the intersection between motivational dynamics and decision outcomes.