Environmental discourse: power, agency, and the 'green consumer'

David Bland, M.Sc. Research Methods (Psych), OU

Abstract

The study of the relationship between consumer behaviour and environmental consequences has intensified in recent years with the growing scientific consensus on anthropogenic climate change. While early studies on green consumer behaviour attempted to quantify environmentally motivated purchasing, and to define the typical characteristics of green consumers in demographic terms, recent studies have tended to adopt a constructivist approach. However, many of these studies have been characterised by an emphasis on the possibilities of consumption for individual empowerment, with the result that questions of environmental policy have frequently been understated.

The present study seeks to achieve a more pragmatic understanding of green consumer discourse by placing an emphasis on issues of environmental policy. Particular consideration is given to the question of whether mainstream green consumer discourse places too great a burden of responsibility for environmental consequences on individual consumers, thus biasing political and corporate accountability. The study employs a range of discourse analytic methods derived from critical discourse analysis and from poststructuralist theories of language and representation.

Introduction

The study of environmentally motivated or 'green' consumer behaviour has generated much academic interest in recent decades. This interest has intensified over the last twenty years, which have witnessed an increasing level of consensus among the scientific community on the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change. Notwithstanding continuing debates concerning the pace of global warming, there now exists a widespread agreement both in scientific and 'lay' communities that human industrial activity and resource consumption has potentially catastrophic consequences for the global eco-system.

Nevertheless, climate change remains just one of a wide variety of issues raised by environmental campaigners. Other ongoing areas for concern highlighted by both activists and scientists include industrial pollution, destruction of forests and other natural habitats, diminishing biodiversity, and the safety of nuclear power generation. The breadth and complexity of these issues renders any attempt to understand 'environmentalism' as a movement – or of 'the environment' as its object of concern – problematic. Nevertheless, the prominence of international organisations with a broad environmental agenda such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, and the emergence in Europe of national Green parties as a credible political force, indicate the growing importance of environmentalism as a political and social movement.

As awareness of the connection between consumption and environmental consequences has become more widespread, consumer behaviour has been subjected to an increasing level of scrutiny from an ecological point of view. The regulation of personal consumption on ecological grounds is well established as a fundamental element of environmentalist thinking. The high level of media attention given to the climate change debate in recent years has arguably played a key role in transforming the concept of green consumption from a minority concern to part of the mainstream of consumer culture. This transformation is evidenced by the frequent use of environmental terminology in marketing discourse; by the ready availability of 'eco-friendly' products in many shops; and by a burgeoning popular literature on 'greening' personal consumption (Hailes, 2007).

However, accountability for patterns of consumption and environmental consequences is a complex issue. Any analysis of environmental degradation must take into account not only the behaviour of domestic consumers, but also the actions of a variety of collective bodies, including both private and public sector organisations. This aspect of the problem is highlighted in a recent report produced by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (2011), which seeks to analyse the environmental implications of projected population growth in the UK in the twenty-first century. This report concludes that, in order to ensure sustainability in the face of a growing population, it will be necessary for the government to make "sustained efforts using all available techniques, including regulation, incentives, education and persuasion, and the continued development and application of better technology" (ibid, p85). According to this analysis, the behaviour of individual consumers must be regarded as an important element influencing the sustainability of the economy as a whole. However, it is also incumbent on governmental authorities not only to influence the behaviour of individual consumers, but also to invest in making sustainable technologies more readily available, and to intervene in markets by means of regulation and incentives.

When viewed in this context, the efficacy of green consumerism as a means of countering environmental risks remains open to debate. Advocates of green consumerism argue that, by

exercising informed choice in the marketplace, individual consumers are able to influence producers by creating a demand for more environment-friendly products and services. By adapting their output to meet this demand, producers will therefore be led to strive for more sustainable methods of production.

On the other hand, critics of this approach maintain that consumers have relatively little power to influence production through the exercise of economic choice. From this perspective, it may be argued that the creation of niche markets for environment-friendly products and services does little to influence total demand in any given sector. Moreover, the complexity of the supply chain, and the difficulties associated with accurately evaluating the environmental impact of any given product, leave green consumers vulnerable to unethical marketers seeking to promote products with spurious environmental claims – a phenomenon frequently termed 'green-wash' in popular environmental literature.

Viewed in terms of environmental policy, these two opposing perspectives on the relationship between consumers and environmental degradation are difficult to reconcile. Nevertheless, much environmentalist discourse exhibits an admixture of the two approaches, arguing for the importance of responsible personal consumption, while simultaneously advocating involvement in environmental campaigning and activism.

The present study intends to explore the ideological aspect of green consumerism by viewing consumer behaviour from the perspective of contested notions of power and accountability. Specifically, it intends to address the question of whether the language of green consumerism may be considered to bias accountability for environmental problems by placing too great an onus of responsibility on individual consumers, thus exonerating producers and other collective agencies of their share of responsibility for environmental protection.

Thus, while acknowledging the vital importance of sustainability in the face of scientific knowledge regarding threats to the environment, the study will attempt a critical evaluation of green consumerism as a means of furthering environmental objectives. In order to achieve this, it is intended to examine the ways in which different aspects of agency – both individual and collective – are portrayed in green consumer discourse. Another area of concern will be the manner in which 'the environment' is constructed as an object of concern by the language of green consumerism. Particular attention will also be paid to the ways in which green consumer discourse uses language to represent concrete processes of environmental degradation, such as pollution and depletion of scarce resources.

Literature review

Early research on green consumption – the positivist tradition

The steady growth of interest in environmental issues since the early 1970's has given rise to a considerable body of research devoted to the impact of environmental awareness on patterns of consumption. Much of this work has sought to identify the characteristics of 'green consumers', environmentally enlightened individuals who seek to modify their consumption of products and services in order to minimise the negative impact this exerts on the environment. This work has attracted attention from academics working in a number of fields, including environmental policy, marketing, and social psychology.

While much early work in the field was devoted to characterising green consumers in terms of demographic profiling, results were largely inconclusive or contradictory, indicating that green consumption was widely dispersed throughout the populations surveyed (Peattie, 2001). A more fruitful line of enquiry, however, sought to establish a link between environmental attitudes and beliefs and the intention to purchase environmentally friendly products and services (Dunlap and Van Liere, 1978; Berger and Corbin, 1992).

An influential concept for researchers working in this area was the "Dominant Social Paradigm" (DSP) proposed by Pirages and Ehrlich (1974). The authors argued that certain hegemonic values characteristic of modern Western society, including belief in continual economic growth, scientific and technological progress, individual property rights, and laissez-faire government, were inherently inimical to environmental sustainability. This idea was taken up by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978), who proposed the concept of an emergent "New Environmental Paradigm" (NEP) which constituted a challenge to the DSP. Dunlap and Van Liere (1978) developed a survey-based instrument to measure adherence to the NEP, and sought to demonstrate that this adherence was not only prevalent in a small minority of environmental activists, but apparently gaining widespread acceptance in the general population.

However, subsequent attempts to link this alleged new willingness to question dominant societal values regarding economic and technological progress with efforts to adopt a more environmentally responsible lifestyle found little evidence of any significant change in actual patterns of consumption (Peattie, 2001). Accordingly, many authors devoted attention to the perceived "attitude-behaviour gap" in the context of green consumption. In more general terms, the difficulty of reconciling attitudes and behaviour has a long history in social psychology (Azjen and Fishbein, 1977). Researchers drawing on this tradition sought to develop a more sophisticated model of environmental attitudes and consumption patterns by, for example, suggesting moderating variables such as "perceived consumer effectiveness" and "faith in others" as a means of bridging the attitude-behaviour gap (Berger and Corbin, 1992).

In general terms, this line of enquiry – which we may characterise as the positivist approach to green consumption - has been useful in identifying certain strategies for promoting the sale of environmentally friendly products and services, and thereby encouraging sustainable consumption. However, work in this tradition is open to criticism on a number of grounds. Certain authors have argued that the project of identifying green consumers – or, indeed, green products and services – is too simplistic to be of any significant value. For example, Peattie (2001) proposes that the selection of products and services on environmental criteria

can only meaningfully be analysed in terms of individual transactions, thus taking full account of contextual factors. Another weakness of the positivist approach lies in its reliance on self-reporting survey methodology, and the consequent problem of data distortion due to socially acceptable responding (Sapsford, 2007).

A more fundamental objection to the work conducted in this tradition is the assertion that it is based on a number of questionable assumptions regarding the efficacy of green consumption in resolving environmental problems. In this context, it has been argued that marketing academics in particular have made an implicit assumption that the most effective way of achieving more sustainable patterns of consumption lies in increasing levels of demand for environmentally friendly products and services. This model of market dynamics places the responsibility for environmental protection primarily with consumers rather than producers, implicitly absolving the latter of the main burden of ethical obligation in this respect. (Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006; Moisander, Markkula, and Eräranta, 2010).

Constructivist contributions

Partly as a means of overcoming these objections, a number of researchers have rejected the positivist approach to studying green consumption, turning instead to the constructivist viewpoint which regards human behaviour as deriving meaning primarily from the use of language (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Consequently, researchers working in this tradition have sought to analyse the phenomenon of green consumption by examining the ways in which consumer identities generally – and specifically green consumer identities – are constructed through the use of discourse. From this perspective, the concept of individual agency is problematized on the grounds that people are shaped as subjects by the constraining influence of modes of discourse which both reflect and enact societal relationships of power (Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

A key influence for writers working in this tradition has been Michel Foucault, whose major works deal primarily with the emergence of disciplinary power as the dominant mode of social control in the industrial era, and the development of this mode of control through institutions such as the penal system, medicine and psychiatry (Foucault, 1979). From a Foucauldian perspective, the process of consumption and the exercise of consumer choice may be regarded as disciplinary practices through which individuals are constituted as compliant subjects of the hegemonic post-industrial order. However, Foucault's later work also suggests that prevailing modes of discourse may be appropriated and inverted by individuals seeking to pursue their own private individualistic agendas. This element of Foucault's thought has been developed over the last decade by a number of writers who have sought to apply the concept of the 'politics of self' to green consumer identities (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002; Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford, 2006; Autio, Heiskanen and Heinonen, 2009).

In a notable contribution to this line of research, Moisander and Pesonen (2002) argue that green consumer behaviour has traditionally been viewed as a rational response to environmental problems, based on ethical principles. However, in the absence of well-defined and absolute standards for ethical behaviour, this "normative-descriptive approach to personal ethics and moral agency" is viewed as problematic. Rather, the authors choose to view green consumer identity as a Foucauldian "politics of the self" in which prevailing forms of subjectivity are challenged and resisted.

Analysing textual data from a large group of marketing students, and interviews with a smaller group of 'eco-communards', Moisander and Pesonen (2002) identify three main modes of discourse drawn on by consumers in constructing green consumer identities: a "reifying individualist moral discourse of 'making a difference'"; a discourse of "voluntary simplicity" based on aesthetic and spiritual values; and a discourse of "radical environmental activism", based on a more politicised and typically anti-capitalist ethos. The authors argue that these prevailing discourses serve to legitimise a "reformist" view of demand-led green consumption, while marginalizing more radical solutions (ibid). The report concludes that, while individual perspectives on green consumption are effectively shaped by these prevailing modes of discourse, the data suggest that green consumerism should be viewed in terms of a creation of self-identity in terms of personal ethics:

> *"It is our view that much of environmental advocacy represents a certain way of thinking and acting that can be characterised as a style of life or as a desire to be a certain kind of person, stemming from a complex interplay of both moral and aesthetic criteria, which on close examination are not completely stable" (Moisander & Pesonen, 2002, p. 330).*

Similarly, in their paper on consumer empowerment, Shankar, Cherrier and Canniford (2006) argue that the mechanisms of consumer choice may be regarded in terms of disciplinary processes or "technologies of 'self'", through which individuals are obliged to create themselves as subjects in terms dictated by hegemonic structures. Shankar et al. (2006) criticize what they regard as the "neoliberal model of consumer empowerment" that is prevalent in the marketing literature, which holds that increasingly competitive markets for consumer goods represent a shift in power from producers to consumers. Rather, it is argued that such empowerment is illusory, and that increasing consumer choice leads to bewilderment and disenchantment.

Nevertheless, the authors conclude by arguing for the adoption of an alternative, Foucauldian model of consumer empowerment, characterised by the increasing use made by consumers of new media technology to challenge dominant producer-generated discourses. Consequently, while increasing market choice is rejected as an indicator of consumer empowerment, it is acknowledged that consumers may empower themselves by actively engaging with the dominant discourses of the market.

These findings are largely supported by Autio, Heiskanen and Heinonen (2009), who also argue for the existence of a mainstream discourse of green consumerism. This discourse is drawn upon in different ways by individuals in order to construct a number of alternative "subject positions", including the essentially reformist "environmental hero"; the "antihero," embracing consumer values and dismissive of environmental concerns, and therefore standing in opposition to the previous position; and the "anarchist", corresponding to the radical, politicised alternative discourse proposed by Moisander and Pesonen (2002).

Just as Shankar et al. (2006) dismiss the notion of consumer empowerment through increasing market choice, Autio et al (2009) note that "there is a genuine danger that the fragmented, piecemeal and individualistic notion of green consumerism is disempowering". In drawing lessons for environmental policy makers, the authors conclude that the interests of sustainable consumption are damaged by overwhelming amounts of detailed information on the environmental implications of individual products and services, and that an emphasis

should instead be placed on providing a simplified and clearly prioritised environmental agenda.

Another poststructuralist theorist who has exerted an influence in the field is Pierre Bourdieu, whose work involved an examination of the role of language in the development of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In his ethnographic study of environmental activists in Lancaster, Horton (2003) draws on Bourdieu's concepts to illustrate how environmental activists use adherence to certain shared codes of behaviour, such as vegetarianism and non-ownership of cars and television sets, to accumulate 'green capital'. Drawing a distinction between 'green codes' and 'green scripts', Horton (ibid.) illustrates how deviation from green codes of behaviour – for example, by purchasing a car – may be acceptable to the group, provided that it is accompanied by a justification which conforms to the appropriate 'script':

> *"Thus, for example, shopping in a supermarket is a breach of green cultural codes, but by placing this behaviour in context, and appealing to mitigating circumstances, such as 'lack of time', 'the need for economy', or 'the requirements of non-green others (children, guests)', supermarket shopping can still conform to a green script."* *(Horton, 2003, p. 68)*

Other writers have looked to the theory of 'reflexive modernization' developed by Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck for a framework for understanding green consumer behaviour (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992). For Giddens (1990), the transition from industrial to post-industrial society has been characterised both by a dissolution of the moral consensus and relatively stable social order associated with traditional society. At the same time, the rapid development of science and technology has led to the emergence of a new class of "manufactured risks", among which concerns about environmental degradation may be included. Reflexive modernization is Giddens' (1990) term for the process by which a variety of agencies – including both individuals and collective entities such as governments or corporations – regulate their activities in response these changing conditions.

For Cherrier (2005), ethical consumption behaviour may be regarded as a notable example of reflexive modernization, in that it constitutes an attempt on the part of consumers to construct a coherent ethical response to perceived environmental risks in the face of increasing moral uncertainty. In her study of 'voluntary simplifiers' – a term coined to describe people who have chosen to limit their consumption, opting instead for a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle – the same author (Cherrier, 2007) depicts green consumerism in terms of a self-identity creation project conducted on the basis of ethical principles. Arguing that grand narratives of ethics and morality have become increasingly fragmented in the postmodern era, Cherrier (2007) asserts that ethically motivated consumers are placed under a greater burden of responsibility to create ethical identities for themselves through a continual process of self-enquiry.

This notion of ethical self-enquiry as the basis for the creation of identity corresponds closely to the Foucauldian 'politics of self' described by Moisander and Pesonen (2002). However, Cherrier (2007) argues that this portrayal of the consumer as an ethical agent making rational, informed decisions is closely related to the "idealistic, neo-liberal notion of the consumer" described by Shankar et al (2006), and liable to criticism on these grounds. This view of the consumer is problematised due to the overwhelming volume and complexity of ethical information, and to the role of social and collective influences in the decision-making process.

Accordingly, the process of green consumer identity-creation is characterised as both an individual and as a collective process. In this connection, Cherrier (2007) examines voluntary simplicity as an example of a "new social movement", whereby values and identities are mutually created through interaction with like-minded individuals by means of "submerged networks". Thus, it is concluded that:

> *"...the selection and creation of ethical consumption practices often get subordinated to societal formation processes. The key reference points for constructing ethical consumption lifestyles come from not only the inside (self-identity) but also the outside (collective identity)." Cherrier (2007), p. 323.*

Criticism of the constructivist literature

As we have seen, recent research in the constructivist tradition has drawn heavily on Foucauldian ideas in its analyses of green consumer behaviour. Specifically, an emphasis has been placed on the role of environmental discourse in challenging and resisting conventional modes of subjectivity, and the creation of alternative subject positions and social identities based on both ethical and aesthetic grounds. In many respects, this approach represents an improvement on the over-simplified assumptions characteristic of the positivist tradition in the field. However, from the perspective of environmental policy, a number of important questions remain unanswered by the poststructuralist approach.

Whereas much early research in the positivist tradition proceeded from the assumption that green consumerism provides a potential solution to environmental problems, this assumption has been called into question by later researchers (Cherrier, 2007; Moisander and Pesonen, 2002). Although there are sound epistemological reasons for this development, it may be argued that the resulting body of work lacks a focus on the concrete implications of different patterns of consumption on the environment. Rather, constructivist accounts have tended to present a relativistic position that concentrates on the role of environmental discourse in the process of personal identity creation. It may be argued that, by effectively bracketing any normative appraisal of green consumer practices, the resulting analyses lose their focus on environmental policy.

Another feature of the constructivist accounts under review is their tendency to employ a broad genealogical methodology in examining accounts of green consumerism. From this perspective, accounts are classified in terms of their relationship to mainstream cultural discourses. However, in employing this method, writers have tended to adopt an uncritical stance to the linguistic categories and tropes of green consumer discourse. Rather, research in this tradition is characterized by an acceptance of the 'emic' definitions contained in their data. In consequence of this tendency, there has been little attempt within the literature to explore the ways in which language itself is employed in the discourse of green consumerism.

Reflexive modernity versus post-modernity

As we have seen, in addition to the key influence of Foucauldian ideas, many of the recent constructivist studies of green consumption have drawn heavily on the theory of reflexive

modernization. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the main proponents of reflexive modernization, Giddens (1990) and Beck (1992), explicitly refute the value of post-modernity as an analytic concept, emphasising instead the continuities between 'early' and 'late' modernity. For example, Giddens (1990) accepts the utility of 'post-modernism' as a term describing "aspects of aesthetic reflection upon the nature of modernity" (emphasis in the original). However, this concept is distinguished from that of 'post-modernity', which implies the advent of a putative societal epoch characterised by a dissolution of epistemological certainties and the abandonment of notions of history and progress. This radical crisis in epistemology is rejected by Giddens as nihilistic and unproductive, on the grounds that it implicitly renders any notion of sociological or philosophical enquiry redundant (ibid).

Other writers, however, defend the proposition that late capitalism has initiated a set of conditions that constitute a radical break from those characteristic of early modernity. For example, in his influential review of postmodernism theory, Jameson (1991) identifies the domination of the natural world by the productive forces of modern capitalism as one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern era. This fundamental alteration in the balance of power between human society and its environment is described as having a profound effect on the way in which natural processes are represented:

> *"In modernism… some residual zones of "nature" or "being," of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that "referent." Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature.""* (Jameson, 1991, p. ix)

Jameson (1991) goes on to describe how other characteristic features of the transition from modern to post-modern experience include an altered phenomenology, resulting in a shift from rational, centred individuals to fragmented and contradictory psyches; and a crisis of representation, with language and other meaning-making systems becoming increasingly unstable. As Jameson (1991) notes, both of these trends are identified as being of central importance within the psychoanalytic tradition developed by Lacan (1989), for whom linguistic structure plays a central role in determining patterns of both conscious and unconscious thought.

The work of Jean Baudrillard (1983; 1986; 1998) provides an account of consumer culture informed by a more epistemologically radical approach to language and signification than that provided by the theorists of reflexive modernity. While Foucault's work on 'technologies of self' identifies opportunities for self-empowerment in counter-hegemonic discourse, Baudrillard's early work - which investigates the status of material objects in post-industrial consumer society (1986; 1998) - emphasises the relative powerlessness of individuals. Baudrillard (1998) describes a "social logic of consumption" whereby consumer choices constitute a "system of signs" by means of which individuals are obliged to create social identities through their patterns of consumption. Due to the totalising and systemic nature of consumption in post-industrial society, individuals are unable to escape this process, even if they wish to reject mainstream societal values. Thus, for Baudrillard, even the non-conformist hippie counterculture of the 1960's, while ostensibly representing a rejection of the hegemonic values of materialism and growth, reinforces these values by defining itself in opposition to them (Baudrillard, 1998, pp. 179-181).

Baudrillard's insistence on the primacy of the realm of signification in late capitalist society leads ultimately to the post-modernist standpoint developed in his later work. From this perspective, efforts to understand material reality become increasingly problematic with the advent of 'hyper-reality', a state of existence in which simulacra - significations of reality - become more 'real' than the reality for which they stand (Baudrillard, 1983). In this situation, the exercise of power becomes a struggle to reclaim reality by means of re-exerting referentiality:

> *"The only weapon of power, its only strategy…is to reinject realness and referentiality everywhere, in order to convince us of the reality of the social, of the gravity of the economy and the finalities of production." (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 42)*

The theme of a crisis of representation is also fundamental to the ideas of Derrida, another influential post-modernist and the architect of deconstruction theory. In an influence essay on structure and signification, Derrida (1978) argues that contemporary thought may be characterised by a radical dissolution of structure, resulting in the effective disappearance of any central signifying concept:

> *"This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse… The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely." (Derrida, 1978, p. 110)*

From this perspective, structural oppositions such as that between nature and culture no longer provide a stable basis for signification. In the context of the present study, this instability has serious implications for our analysis of a body of discourse in which the concept of 'the environment' holds a central position.

Methodological discussion

Critical orientation of the study

The focus of the present study is on the possibilities and limitations of green consumerism as a means of addressing environmental problems, and as such, it aims to examine the ways in which concrete processes of environmental degradation and protection are represented in green consumer discourse. The analysis is intended to focus also on the way in which individual and collective agencies related to these processes – for example, consumers, commercial organisations, and governmental bodies – are represented in this discourse. In this manner, it is hoped that the study will be able to furnish fresh insight into the phenomenon of green consumption from the viewpoint of environmental policy.

As demonstrated above, recent constructivist studies of green consumer discourse tend to exhibit certain unresolved epistemological tensions. Specifically, two issues emerge from the literature review which demand further consideration. First, while the majority of authors working in the constructivist tradition accept – either explicitly or tacitly - the legitimacy and importance of environmental concerns, studies in this area tend to be characterised by a relativistic approach to analysis which brackets the concrete implications of green consumer discourse for the environment. From this perspective, it may be argued that analysing green consumer discourse primarily in terms of self-identity creation risks abandoning any attempt to evaluate consumer behaviour in normative terms.

One of the principles underpinning the present study is the conviction that domestic consumption – that is, the consumption of individual consumers regarded as a totality – is necessarily an important factor in any consideration of environmental issues. This being the case, the study intends to acknowledge a priori the legitimacy of attempts to ameliorate consumption practices from an environmental perspective. In this manner, it is hoped that the analysis will avoid what Wetherell (2001) terms the "spectre of relativism", retaining instead a commitment to the production of knowledge that may be beneficial to analysts of environmental problems.

For this reason, the methodology chosen for the study is based in part upon the conception of critical discourse analysis (CDA) developed by Norman Fairclough (1992; 2003). Fairclough's approach to CDA is deemed appropriate to the requirements of the present study for two main reasons. First, Fairclough's method is centred on the interrogation of textual data to provide insight into specific social problems. For Fairclough, textual analysis is critical in intent in that it aims to answer questions regarding a certain pre-defined social problem:

> *"Beginning with a social problem rather than the more conventional 'research question' accords with the critical intent of (CDA) – to produce knowledge which can lead to emancipatory change." (Fairclough, 2003, p. 209).*

This critical orientation has its basis in the materialist tradition in the social sciences, and has much in common with Marxist thought. In the context of the present study, the adoption of such an approach will allow the analysis to focus on the relationship between material processes such as production and consumption and their representation in the cultural sphere through modes of discourse.

A second feature of Fairclough's model of CDA is its emphasis on close textual analysis at the lexico-grammatical level (Fairclough, 1992). This feature of Fairclough's work is indicative of the importance he accords to grammatical forms in performing an ideological function, and is derived largely from the influence of the applied linguist M.A.K Halliday (Halliday, 1976, 1990). Specifically, Fairclough draws extensively on Halliday's model of systemic functional grammar to illustrate the ways in which information regarding socio-cultural circumstances is embedded in discourse at a lexico-grammatical level (Fairclough, 2003). While Fairclough (2003) acknowledges that lexico-grammatical features may serve as distinguishing marks which identifying particular generic discourses, he argues that discourse analysis must proceed from detailed grammatical interrogation in order to fully understand the nature and functions of these discourses.

Just as Fairclough's method is grounded in a materialist conception of discourse, Halliday argues for the importance of grammar in both reflecting and shaping social and material realities. In an influential paper concerned with language planning and environmental policy, Halliday argues that contemporary discourse demonstrates a reflection of, and a bias towards, industrial and post-industrial modes of production (Halliday, 1990). This bias is "embedded" in the language at a grammatical level, and thus is not consciously apparent to everyday language users. Examples of this systemic bias include the positive connotations of concepts such as size and growth; the characterization of non-human natural entities as passive and inert; and the grammatical treatment of natural resources as "boundless" and, by implication, inexhaustible (Halliday, 2003, pp. 194-195).

By drawing on elements adopted both from Fairclough's critically oriented method, and from Halliday's conception of the relationship between language and modes of production, it is hoped that the present study will succeed in grounding its examination of environmentalism in a pragmatic conception of discourse analysis that may offer practical insights to those concerned with issues of environmental policy.

Language and representation

A second issue emerging from the literature review concerns the role of language in discourse, and the analytic method adopted by authors working in the constructivist tradition. It has been demonstrated above that many of these authors have acknowledged the breakdown of grand narratives of truth and morality associated with late modernism, and the implications of this breakdown for personal ethics (Cherrier, 2005). This dissolution of grand narratives is frequently cited as one of the cornerstones of post-modernist theory. Partly in consequence of this process, Moisander and Pesonen (2002) conclude that the self-identities and ethical positions created by green consumers tend to lack stability. However, it may be argued that studies in this tradition have largely failed to explore the role of language in relation to this instability, and the implications of a post-modern theory of language for the analysis of green consumerism.

In order to address this failure, the present study intends to supplement the analytic framework suggested by Fairclough and Halliday with certain ideas derived from structural linguistics, and from the poststructuralist tradition. As we have seen, Jameson (1991) cites Lacan as a key theorist within the post-modernist tradition, primarily by virtue of his work on the primacy of language in structuring both the conscious and subconscious mind. In an

influential essay entitled 'The agency of the letter in the unconscious', Lacan (1989) argues that language should be analysed in terms of what he regards as the radical disjuncture between its terms of verbal expression and the referents these terms serve to represent. Drawing upon the work of structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1983), he suggests that any thorough analysis of language must take account of what he terms "an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier" (Lacan, 1989, p170).

With reference to Freud's (1999) work on the analysis of dreams, Lacan (1989) suggests that this disjuncture between signifier and signified corresponds closely to what Freud termed entstellung, or the 'distortion' or 'transposition' of referents by the unconscious mind during dreams. Lacan goes on to assert that the two main processes of enstellung identified by Freud – verdichtung, or 'condensation', and verschiebung, or 'displacement' - correspond closely to the operation of metaphor and metonymy in linguistic usage (ibid). Lacan derives this terminology from Roman Jakobson (1971), another linguist closely associated with the ideas of de Saussure, who identified metaphor and metonymy as the two main poles of linguistic representation.

In the present study, it will be argued that these ideas are of significant value in helping to understand the representation of key environmental issues and processes in green consumer discourse. If we accept the notion that language plays an active role in constructing the realities it is used to represent, concepts such as 'the environment', 'pollution', or 'environmental degradation' must be viewed critically from this perspective. By examining the ways in which language is employed to construct these concepts, we may gain fresh insight into the possibilities and limitations of green consumer discourse for effecting positive change.

Data collection

In order to explore the issues of agency and representation in green consumer discourse, it was necessary to obtain samples of text for analysis. Given the increasing attention devoted to environmental concerns in the cultural sphere in recent years, the problem of selecting text for analysis demanded considerable thought. A wide variety of potential sources for textual analysis were considered, including newspaper articles addressing green consumer issues; popular environmental and green or ethical consumer magazines; and advertisements for environmental products. However, these sources were rejected in favour of samples of discourse elicited directly from committed environmentalists. The latter approach has two main advantages. First, by focusing attention on language employed by green consumers themselves, a more direct insight into the social psychology of green consumption may be obtained. Second, as a similar approach to sourcing data has been employed by many previous authors in the field, the resulting analysis may be better suited for purposes of comparison and critical evaluation.

In order to establish contact with potential respondents, approaches were made to representatives of a number of local environmental organisations, including the Green Party of Northern Ireland and Friends of the Earth. These contacts were sent a briefing document explaining the purpose and nature of the study, and asked to distribute this information to members in the local area with a view to eliciting the support of volunteers willing to participate in a study of green consumption practices. Volunteers who contacted the

researcher to express an interest in participating in the study were then sent further details of the project, and asked to confirm their interest.

For the purpose of obtaining textual data for analysis, respondents were asked to keep a journal for a period of approximately one month, recording details of their shopping and other consumption practices and their thoughts concerning the environmental impacts of this activity. The briefing document encouraged respondents to adopt a subjective and open-ended approach to writing their journals, and to include information on their personal histories, general environmental beliefs, and any other material they considered relevant. It was hoped that this open-ended approach would help to elicit spontaneous accounts containing information that may have been absent had a more structured approach been employed.

The initial project design allowed for the recruitment of around twelve respondents, on the basis that this would allow for the selection of a small number of detailed accounts for analysis. While a total of twelve volunteers expressed an interest in participating in the project, only one completed journal was received at the end of the fieldwork period. However, this journal was a detailed text of more than seven thousand words, and its quality and substance was such that it was considered sufficient to serve as a sole text on which to base the analysis. The decision to proceed with the analysis of a single text, rather than attempting to analyse data from multiple sources, was considered appropriate to the methodology outlined above, which called for close textual analysis rather than a broader approach.

Ethical issues

As data for the project was to be elicited on a voluntary basis from individuals rather than selected from published sources, careful consideration was given to ethical issues, both during the planning and data collection stages of the project and when conducting the analysis. Both the contacts approached as potential 'gatekeepers' and volunteers were given assurances that personal data would be treated as strictly confidential, and that any material used in the analysis would be done so on an anonymous basis. Respondents were also made fully aware of the right to withdraw their participation at any time, and encouraged to contact the researcher to discuss any aspect of the project.

Given that individuals were being asked to document what were considered likely to be deeply felt and cherished beliefs, a burden of obligation was felt by researcher to ensure that the analysis would not serve to misrepresent or undermine these beliefs in any way. Rather than placing limitations on the objectivity of the analysis, this ethical obligation was considered entirely consistent with the critical orientation of the project as described above. Nevertheless, these ethical considerations rendered certain lines of analytic enquiry less appropriate than others. For example, while certain passages in the text may have been regarded as consonant with Horton's (2003) analysis of green codes and scripts, and the accumulation of green capital, it was felt this line of enquiry might legitimately be regarded as hostile and exploitative by the respondent. Accordingly, such interpretations of the data were rejected.

A specific issue concern raised by the respondent on whose data the analysis was ultimately based regarded the uses to which the research might be put. In this connection, the respondent

expressed a concern that research on green consumers is potentially liable to exploitation by unethical marketers. His correspondence states:

> *"As someone who tries to be a green/ethical consumer one of the things that has made this more difficult is the amount of 'greenwash' in marketing of some very unethical products. My concern would be that a possible unintentional consequence of your research would be that it would provide unethical companies with an insight into how to target the green consumer. (Email from respondent, 2010)"*

The researcher's reply to this objection acknowledged that, in his view, much previous research on green consumption has been characterised by simplistic assumptions regarding the existence of well-defined categories of environmentally friendly products, and the extent to which real environmental benefits may be derived from maximising sales of such products. He continued:

> *"I hope to avoid this problem in the study in a number of ways. First, by seeking to recruit through environment-oriented organisations, I aim to gather data from informed environmentalists who will have considered these issues at length already, and be sensitive to the dangers of falling prey to 'greenwash'. Second, by using a qualitative approach…I hope to obtain data on the actual routine contexts of consumption choices. This should allow more radical views to emerge – for example, food self-sufficiency, or strategies for reducing consumption rather than simply choosing alternative products." (Email from researcher to respondent, 2010)*

This exchange is interesting in two respects. First, regarded as supplementary data, the respondent's objection provides further evidence to challenge simplistic notions regarding the desirability of green products. Second, the exchange in its entirety illustrates the way in which it was necessary for the researcher to establish a mutual understanding of the objectives underlying the research in order to obtain the respondent's consent to participate. In this sense, the project may be viewed in certain respects as a collaborative endeavour between researcher and respondent on the basis of a shared perspective. It is to a large extent this spirit of collaboration that underpins the ethical standpoint of the project as a whole.

Analysis

Genre and discourses

As a preliminary to the main part of the analysis, I wish to consider the formal properties of the 'consumer journal' format. In this context, is it necessary to remember that the data to be analysed is a text which has been elicited specifically for the purpose of research, and that its generic structure is broadly prescribed by the briefing document, to which it constitutes a response. Consequently, in agreeing to participate in the research, the respondent has undertaken to produce a piece of writing that conforms to certain generic requirements.

The use of ethnographic material in qualitative research encompasses both social scientific academic work and commercially oriented market research, and has arguably become more commonplace in both these areas in recent years. The consumer journal may be seen as a specific sub-genre of ethnographic research data. A genealogy of the consumer journal format might reveal its close kinship with ethnographic life-histories, as well as its formal similarities to other forms of popular discourse not necessarily within the domain of research – for example, the internet based 'blog', and the video diary format popularised by 'reality television' shows.

The premise of the consumer journal is that, by recording everyday consumption in an informal and discursive manner, the research subject will provide research data that has the potential to reveal patterns of behaviour and motivation that might otherwise be difficult to elicit. This in turn is based on the ethnographic tradition, dating back to Malinowski (1922), that behaviour may only be understood when observed in its routine, quotidian context.

Working on the premise that textual genres may be characterised in terms of certain configurations of key grammatical features (Eggins, 1994; Fairclough, 2003), we can discern a number of such features as being required elements of the consumer journal format. This format may be seen to consist of a combination of three main elements. The first of these is the narration of an account of the respondent's 'life history', elicited as a means of providing a contextual background for his or her present opinions, value orientation, and behaviour. This element is realized in the text mainly by the use of declarative, first person statements in the past tense, and is evident in the opening section of the text under consideration, in lines 6 to 32. For example:

> *I became vegetarian when I was 19 and vegan when I was 20. This was the beginning of the self regulation of my consumption on ethical grounds. (lines 6-7)*

> *I have subscribed to the Ethical Consumer magazine from the year 2000. I suspect that I saw it advertised in the 'Animal Free Shopper', which I used to describe as the vegan bible… (lines 14-16)*

The second element consists of statements of habitual behaviour. These are realized mainly by means of present tense declarative statements, which may or may not be modalized by expressions of usuality (Eggins, 1994, p.179). For example:

> *I would also pay more for a product from an independent retailer rather than buy it from (a) supermarket. However my partner D does most of the shopping and she tends to go to large supermarkets… (lines 41-43)*

This element is particularly evident in the text in lines 34 to 62. However, it recurs frequently throughout the main body of the text.

The third structural element of the consumer journal format conforms closely to the format of personal diary writing, and consists mainly of statements relating everyday experience on an episodic basis. This element is more grammatically diverse than those described above, combining narrated daily events with statements of affect or evaluation, existential statements, and statements that correspond to the first two structural elements described above. The following passage exemplifies this combination of grammatical elements:

> *I have just discovered that Jordan's cereal which used to be an Ethical Consumer 'best buy' is now rated 5 (out of 20). While the founding company Jordans gets a rating of 16 the brand is now part owned by a number of different companies. I suspect that I will continue to use the product as the product itself still seems relatively 'good' (it uses conservation grade oats) and is made in the UK, however I will keep an eye out for a 'better' product. However many of the higher rated cereals are muesli which I don't find appealing and the others are not widely available. (lines 68-74)*

The consumer journal format, therefore, combines a number of standard formal elements, which serve to create a particular type of narrative of consumer experience. It may be argued that this characteristic narrative blend of everyday consumer experience, life history, and statements of opinion or belief serves to reinforce a number of conceptions of consumption behaviour. Most fundamentally, by providing explanations for everyday decisions in terms of personal history, opinions, values, or preference, the format imposes a level of teleological coherence over behaviour that may in actuality be capricious or random. In this sense, the consumer journal constitutes a fictionalisation of behaviour and motivations that may in actuality lack any inherent coherence or rational basis.

When considered as an account of everyday experience written according to the conventions of a familiar generic format, the consumer journal may be seen to exhibit a specific ideological function. By constituting the consumer as a rational, unitary subject who is free to select products and services according to the dictates of personal values, beliefs and tastes, the format reinforces the concept of demand-driven marketing, whereby producers tailor goods and services to meet the demands of a dynamic and evolving market. This ideological function of the sub-genre is perhaps unsurprising given its close association with commercially orientated marketing research.

However, while textual genres are defined and realized by certain formal grammatical properties, they also exhibit a large degree of fluidity. In this context, Fairclough (2003) characterises genres as hybridisations of different elements of discourse, exhibiting indefinite boundaries and prone to constant evolution. Given the inherent complexity and dynamism of language itself, and its capacity to make different types of meanings simultaneously (Eggins, 1994), we may see how a text can both adhere to its formal generic requirements and subtly challenge the ideological position which these requirements reinforce.

In this context, we may discern a recurring type of discourse woven by the respondent into the text which departs from the conventional consumer journal, and which may be termed

that of 'public policy'. While the discourse of the consumer journal conventionally focuses on individual accountability, that of public policy switches the emphasis to governmental bodies and other loci of collective power. This strand of discourse is first evidenced in the following passage:

> *At the onset of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 I asked to have my pay reduced to below the level required to pay income to tax and wrote to each of the political parties and the Prime Minister about my decision. I also limited myself to essential purchases (food and travel) to avoid paying VAT. Essentially I wanted to send the message "Not in my name and not with my money". (lines 23-27)*

Here, the respondent relates his attempt to challenge what he regards as the individual complicity in governmental foreign policy constituted by his payment of taxes. He goes on to describe how, having concluded that "this kind of individual action was ineffective", he decided to engage more directly in political action by joining the Green Party. In this passage, the respondent is conforming to the prescribed format of the consumer journal on one level by narrating a formative experience in the development of his personal beliefs. On another level, he is implicitly challenging the simplistic notions of individual accountability inherent in the genre.

Another similar example of the employment of the discourse of public policy occurs later in the text. In this example, the respondent argues that individual choices regarding public versus private transport are largely constrained by the availability of public transport services:

> *If a higher proportion of the transport budget was spent on public transport (currently its 19% in NI compared with 60% in England and moving towards 66% in ROI) it would be cheaper and there would be better provisions. (lines 554-556)*

Given the structural tension existing in the text between different types of discourse and their ideological implications, we can conclude that the data under analysis is perhaps most usefully viewed in rhetorical terms. Critical discourse analyst Michael Billig (1985) has argued for the utility of viewing the use of categories of differentiation and discrimination not as expressions of personal prejudice, but as rhetorical tools for constructing particular ways of viewing the world. From this perspective, one of the tasks of the present analysis consists of examining the ways in which the respondent uses language to create a particular type of argument.

Multiple criteria for the evaluation of products and services

One of the central themes of the text is the selection of products and services on ethical grounds. In the introductory section of the journal, the respondent describes a number of criteria that he employs for selecting products. First, as a practising vegan, he strives to avoid the purchase and use of animal products as far as possible. The fundamental importance of this concept to the respondent is emphasised by its emergence at the very beginning of the journal text:

> *I became vegetarian when I was 19 and vegan when I was 20. This was the beginning of the self regulation of my consumption on ethical grounds (lines 6-7).*

Second, a number of publications are cited as sources of information regarding the ethical performance of certain retail and manufacturing organizations. These include Animal Free Shopper, an online and print-based journal published by the Vegan Society which provides listings of animal-free products; and Ethical Consumer magazine, along with the related Ethiscore website, which provides comparative evaluations of companies and products in terms of ethical performance in terms of a variety of criteria.

Third, in addition to his avoidance of animal products, the respondent states that he employs four broad product categories as a basis for selection, these being: second hand; Fairtrade; local; and organic (lines 34-39). Each of these categories is exemplified in the main body of the text with specific items of food, clothing, and other purchases.

Fourth, the respondent discriminates between different retailers on ethical grounds. In this context, he draws a distinction between large chain retailers and small independently-owned stores:

> *I would also pay more for a product from an independent retailer rather than buy it from supermarket (lines 41-42).*

Ethiscore ratings are cited throughout the text to provide an objective appraisal of the comparative ethical performance of different retailers. Partly on the basis of these ratings, the respondent states that he has evolved his own hierarchy of supermarket preference, with Asda the least favoured, and Co-op the most.

Thus, in the introductory section of the text, we are presented with an elementary system of rules for discriminating between products on ethical grounds. These rules do not constitute a set of absolute standards. In many cases they are used in conjunction with other criteria, such as availability, price, or personal taste. Moreover, in certain cases they provide contradictory advice, and a decision needs to be made on the basis of other criteria. Accordingly, the rules laid out in the introductory section of the text are most usefully viewed as a system of heuristics, designed to simplify decision making and to minimise the amount of deliberation required in choosing products and services.

By looking at the respondent's account of purchasing decisions in specific product areas, we can expand on the way in which this heuristic system is put to use in practical terms. Before proceeding to individual product areas, however, I will consider the way in which different retail outlets are represented in the text, and how the respondent describes the relative merits of different retailers.

Discriminating between retailers

The text contains references to a wide range of different retailers. In addition to making references to individual retailers, the text also employs a number of categories to characterize such outlets. By examining the nominal groups employed to group retailers together, and by looking at how these groupings correlate fit into the selection criteria described by the respondent, we can begin to understand the way in which the retail sector is represented within the text in systematic terms.

First, we may consider the way in which supermarkets feature in the text. As noted above, the respondent differentiates between "supermarkets" and "local retailers", and expresses a preference for using the latter, even if this means paying higher prices (lines 41-42). He then goes on to state that his partner "tends to use large supermarkets" for the majority of the shopping, and that this has caused some degree of "contention" between them (lines 42-43). In this passage, therefore, a fundamental distinction is implicitly drawn between small and local retailers on the one hand, and those that are large and non-local on the other. This distinction carries an evaluative content, and establishes positive connotations for both localness and smallness of scale.

It is interesting to note that, while references to "supermarkets" in the text are generally unmarked by supplementary adjectives, other than "large" (line 43), frequent use is made of adjectives denoting non-largeness. Thus, for example, we see frequent references to "local" retailers, printers, and grocers; and "independent" health stores, cafés, and skate shops. This use of adjectival marking within the text to connote localness and independence suggests that the (unmarked) retail outlet is seen as lacking these connotations - and, by implication, that the large is non-local is viewed as the prevailing norm.

Despite his avowed preference for avoiding supermarkets altogether, references to specific supermarket chains - for example, Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer, Co-op, Asda and Tesco - abound in the text. The frequency of such references is a strong indication of the supermarkets' domination of the retail sector, and the practical difficulties faced by consumers who prefer to use them as little as possible. As stated above, the respondent cites ratings of ethical performance provided by the Ethiscore website in support of his own hierarchy of supermarket preference. While Co-op is rated most favourably – and is consequently his preferred supermarket – Asda is rated least favourably.

An interesting feature of the respondent's "supermarket hierarchy" is its invocation of an ethical continuum ranging from "good" (Co-op) to "evil" (Asda) (lines 89-93). Similar examples of the language of moral evaluation can be seen elsewhere in the text, for example in the differentiation between "goodies" and "baddies" (line 20). In the latter case, the use of inverted commas modalizes these usages and suggests an element of irony and humour. When regarded in this light, we can view the employment of unequivocally moralistic terminology for the evaluation of everyday products and retailers as an example of the rhetorical technique of *reductio ad absurdam*, whereby the usefulness of such categories is implicitly challenged.

While grocery retailers are broadly categorized as either "supermarkets" or "local, independent" stores, a similar distinction is made with regard to clothing retailers. Here, the

dominant category corresponding to the large, non-local supermarket is represented by the "high street". This metonymical term is widely used in discourses of everyday consumption and business reportage. Within the context of the present text, however, it carries negative connotations through the establishment of relations of equivalence with poor labour conditions. For example:

> *My socks and boxer shorts are from Primark and Next (I think), and probably therefore some form of slave labour. Next receive negative marks by EC for "operations in 4 oppressive regimes" and are rated 6.5 overall. Primark are even worse with an overall rating of 3 with negative marks for "abuse of the human rights of Bangladeshi garment workers" and "workers paid less than a living wage". (lines 188-192).*

As in the case of grocery stores, high street fashion stores are contrasted with a number of more ethical alternatives. Some of these are marked by virtue of their independence and local character - for example, "local indie skate shops" (line 210). Others are marked by specialisms which correspond directly to the heuristic categories described by the respondent in the introductory section of the text – for example, second-hand and vintage clothing store Mike Hunt (line 179). Other specialist ethical retailers operate online or mail order services, such as Vegetarian Shoes (line 217) or the Amnesty International webshop (line 195).

Shopping for food and beverages

Food shopping is the area of consumption behaviour described in most detail in the text. The main guiding principle in the respondent's selection of food products is his veganism, which involves abstinence from animal products. The reasons underlying the respondent's adoption of first a vegetarian and then a vegan diet are not explicitly discussed in the text. However, we learn that that they have an ethical basis from their identification with the beginning of his ethical self-regulation (lines 6-7). The text also cites Animal Free Shopper (an external source published by the Vegan Society) as providing comprehensive statements of the rationale underlying veganism as a philosophy (lines 15-17).

In similar fashion, an explicitly ethical rationale for abstinence from meat is largely absent from the text. The one exception is provided by a reference to "butter from flatulent mistreated cows" (line 154). Here, a single nominal group contains incidental references to two distinct reasons for the avoidance of dairy products - first, the alleged acceleration of climate change by methane produced by cattle; and second, by association with animal mistreatment.

In consequence of the centrality of abstinence from animal products in the respondent's selection of foodstuffs, many of these are categorised primarily in terms of the division between vegan and non-vegan, or vegetarian and non-vegetarian. While consumption of certain products containing dairy ingredients (for example, chocolate biscuits) does feature in the text, this is either mitigated with reference to the difficulty of sourcing vegan alternatives (lines 286-288), or explained as lapse of principle due to "plain, simple weakness" (lines 157-158).

The only product containing meat purchased by the respondent is tinned cat food. This is justified on the grounds of animal welfare, as cats – unlike dogs and, by inference, people - are said to depend on "vital nutrients found in meat" for their physical well-being. This justification has a parallel in the text in the case of dairy-based formula milk, which the respondent's baby is permitted on the grounds of medical advice provided by the National Health Service. This passage provides an interesting example of the dilemmas presented by conflicting advice from different 'expert' sources:

> *I did some research into soya formulas but there is very little info. NHS advice is not to use soya formula unless advised to do so by a GP. I suspect that this is due to a lack of research as opposed to evidence that soya formula is dangerous but the only source that I could find that said soya formula was safe was through the Vegan Society which is hardly an independent source (lines 163-166).*

In addition to considerations of animal product content, foodstuffs categorized as organic or Fairtrade are also preferred. Once again, there is no explicit ethical justification for these preferences in the text. However, the value of Fairtrade labelling is implicitly affirmed in a passage discussing the sustainability of Forest Stewardship Council approved products:

> *There is some debate in the green movement about just how sustainable these forests are. We are often suspicious of anything that is too successful so there is an assumption that given that the FSC is now approving Argos flat packs that they must have reduced their standards...The fact that KitKat is now Fairtrade doesn't devalue the FT brand. However it won't make me start buying chocolate from Nestle... (lines 430-437).*

Representation of environmental processes

Turning our attention to the representation of concrete processes of environmental degradation within the text, we are faced with two major problems. The first of these lies in the difficulties involved in defining the 'environmental'. References are made in the text to a wide range of negative effects associated with specific products and activities. However, the negativity of these effects is defined in relation to a broad conception of ethics encompassing concern not only for 'natural' environments, but also human and societal objects.

Close analysis reveals carbon emissions resulting from the use of fossil fuels, and the concomitant risk of accelerating climate change, to be the environment-impacting processes most frequently referred to in the text. This process is evoked not only in the frequent references throughout the journal to the use of cars for private transportation, but also in references to the long-distance shipping of goods, and to the domestic and industrial consumption of electricity. As stated above, the issue of anthropogenic climate change has increasingly dominated popular discussions of environmental risk in recent years, and consequently its prominence in the text is unsurprising. Indeed, climate change may be considered an environmental cause *par excellence*, as its object of concern is not limited to a specific locality or habitat, but is rather the global ecosystem in its entirety.

Pollution is another process referred to in the text that is conventionally associated with environmental degradation. In this case, agricultural pollution arising from the use of

pesticides and fertilisers is evoked indirectly by references to organic produce; and pollution of the water supply is attributed to the use of "harsh chemicals" in domestic cleaning products. Direct reference is also made to the use of forestry land for the production of wood for furniture, and the sustainability of this process called into question.

However, other negative effects featuring in the text do not conform to conventional nations of environmental risks. Most prominently, extensive consideration is given to social effects arising from the exploitation of labour in the developing world. This process is considered most frequently in connection with the production of cotton garments, which is equated in the text to "slave labour" (line 189). However, the consumption of mass-market soft drinks is also associated with negative social consequences:

> *I know that (Coca Cola) suppress trade unionism in Columbia. I know that there are villages in India that have no access to clean water because it has all been used to make Coke. But it is the one consumer vice that I can't shift. Pepsi contributed millions of dollars to George Bush election campaigns so they are hardly an ethical alternative (lines 302-304).*

In this passage, the production of Coca Cola is linked overtly with negative consequences in certain specific local environments. However, by drawing a comparison with Pepsi Cola's relationship with the George Bush presidential campaigns, the text establishes a relationship of equivalence between such consequences and others that may be inferred to arise from US policy under the Bush administration.

The second problem that arises in analysing the representation of environmental processes within the text stems from a general absence of direct reference to environmental consequences. As we have seen above, a variety of environment impacting processes may be inferred from the text, including anthropogenic climate change, agricultural and industrial pollution, and damage to local environments in the developing world. However, in the majority of instances, no explicit reference is made to these effects. Rather, it is left to the reader to infer the effect in question from references to causative factors. For example, while we see frequent references to the use of cars for private transportation, and the consumption of petrol and electricity, the text contains no single reference to global warming or climate change.

The causative connection between carbon emissions and climate change is thus inferred by the reader rather than made explicit in the text. This inference is made possible by two separate factors. First, as already noted, extensive media coverage of the climate change debate has put knowledge of the issue firmly into the public domain, and the majority of readers of the text can therefore reasonably be expected to possess an adequate understanding of the link between these causes and the posited effect. Second, as the text has been created within a certain set of circumstances - ie. a consumer journal conceived as a discussion of environmental consequences - such causative links are implicit in the contextual structure of the text itself. Nevertheless, the absence of any explicit discussion of the link between car use and climate change, for example, masks certain assumptions. Drawing on terminology employed by Fairclough (2003), we can conclude that the text in this respect contains both propositional assumptions - for example, the assumption of a causative relationship between carbon emissions and climate change – and value assumptions, for example the assumption that climate change is a 'bad thing'.

One further point to note regarding the representation of environmental processes in the text concerns the way in which they are inferred grammatically. Drawing on the distinction drawn by Jakobson (1971) between the metaphoric and metonymic poles of linguistic representation, analysis of the text reveals an overwhelming preponderance of metonymy in the representation of environmental effects.

Metaphor operates by substituting a symbolic term for the referent, thus implicitly drawing a comparison between the referent and its symbolic representation. As the substituted term bears no direct relationship to the referent, metaphor may therefore be said to operate on the principle of unrelatedness (Chandler, 2007). Metonymy, on the other hand, operates by the substitution of related terms. Thus, in metonymic representation, verbal substitution may occur between cause and effect; between a part of the referent and its whole; or between substance and form (ibid).

As we have seen, the consumer journal makes virtually no direct reference to the environmental effects of consumption practices, concentrating instead on their causes. For example, in explicit terms, climate change is notable as an absence from the text. However, each reference to car use or energy consumption may be regarded as a metonymic representation of global warming and its concomitant risks.

Discussion

At the outset of this paper, two questions were posed in relation to the discourse of green consumerism. The first of these questions concerned the ways in which 'the environment' is constructed by this discourse as an object of concern, particularly with reference to the representation of concrete processes of environmental degradation. The second question involved exploring the implications of green consumer discourse and its system of representations in terms of individual agency and power relations. The brief analysis of data above provides us with some material with which we can at least begin to answer these questions.

As we have seen, analysis shows the text to contain very little explicit discussion of environmental effects and consequences. Rather, these effects tend to be represented metonymically by means of reference to their perceived causes. For example, the process of global warming is not represented directly in the text; instead, it is left to the reader to infer the concept of global warming from references to petrol and energy consumption. These inferences are necessitated by the need for coherence in the grammatical propositions presented in the text (Eggins, 1994), and made possible by the ready availability of knowledge concerning climate change.

In one important sense, therefore, environmental processes such as climate change and pollution are present in the text largely as an absence. This absence of direct reference to what must be regarded as one of the main themes of the text is interesting from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory. Just as the objects of wish-fulfilment in Freud's (1999) dream analyses are not represented directly in the dream-work, but are displaced or transposed by means of metaphor and metonymy, so the objects of concern in the text are represented almost solely by reference to causes rather than to effects. It may be argued that this absence of the main object of concern in the text may be understood in terms of Lacan's (1979) tripartite system of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In this context,

environmental consequences correspond to the Real, the traumatic order of physicality which Lacan regards as defying representation.

Read in this context, it may be argued that the absence of direct reference to environmental consequences in the text reveals an important characteristic of contemporary phenomenology in the face of what Giddens (1990) terms "the runaway, juggernaut character of modernity". According to this viewpoint, individuals in late modernity are obliged to keep their awareness of the risks of environmental catastrophe in check in order to protect themselves from a potentially debilitating anxiety. As Giddens notes (ibid):

> *"How can we constantly keep in the forefront of our minds dangers which are enormously threatening, yet so remote from individual control? The answer is that most of us cannot. People who worry all day, every day, about the possibility of nuclear war… are liable to be thought disturbed. While it would be difficult to deem irrational someone who was constantly and consciously anxious in this way, this outlook would paralyse ordinary day-to-day life." (Giddens, 1990, pp. 131-132).*

Another interesting finding that emerges from the analysis is the preponderance of metonymy rather than metaphor employed in relation to environmental processes in the text. In this connection, it should be noted that Halliday's work on language and the environment tends to concentrate on the prevalence of grammatical metaphor in the representation of environmental processes. This emphasis in Halliday's work has led to an ongoing debate between ecolinguists regarding the ideological function of grammatical metaphor in environmental representation, and the desirability of finding alternative modes of linguistic usage (Goatly, 1996; Schleppegrell, 1997).

In the context of this debate, the relative absence from the text of metaphor as a vehicle for representing environmental processes is somewhat surprising. The implications of this absence may be illuminated by reference to Jakobson's (1971) work on metaphor and metonymy. This distinction may be further clarified by the observation that, while metaphor operates on the principle of apparent dissimilarity, metonymy exploits the relatedness of the chosen signifier to its referent (Chandler, 2002). In reviewing the representational characteristics of major literary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jakobson (1971) argues that metaphor is characteristic of romanticism and symbolism, while metonymy is more prevalent in the realist tradition exemplified by novelists such as Tolstoy. Viewed in this light, the text is noticeably lacking in any reference to a romanticized concept of nature or the environment, limiting its environmental references instead to a consistently pragmatic system of causality.

Nevertheless, if we attempt to discern an overall structure of signification in the text, the absence of any direct representation of environmental processes remains problematic. This is particularly so if we attempt to identify any definition of 'the environment' within the text. In common usage, such definitions usually operate on the basis of an opposition between humankind and its non-human surroundings. In this sense, the popular concept of the environment is closely related to the opposition between nature and culture frequently cited by structural anthropologists as the essential basis for any structural understanding of myth (Derrida, 1978). In the text, however, we are presented with a broadly ethical standpoint in which 'the environment' does not play a central role. Rather, the conception of ethics portrayed in the text is broad and holistic in character.

As we can see from the analysis, objects of ethical concern in the text include warfare; exploitation of labour in the developing world; financial speculation; and parental responsibility. Viewed in terms of a definition of the environment based solely on the opposition of nature and culture, we can see that these concerns are not strictly environmental, but rather social in character. The theme of the text as a whole may therefore more easily be identified with 'ethical consumption' than 'green consumption'. This reading of the text corresponds closely to Cherrier's (2007) description of an introspective self-examination of personal behaviour in the light of increasing moral complexity and uncertainty.

However, while the conventional opposition of nature and culture is largely absent from the text, the analysis also reveals those between local and global, and small and large, to be at the centre of the system of ethical evaluation it contains. As we have seen, small, local suppliers are favoured by the writer in preference to large, global enterprises such as supermarkets and high street stores. Moreover, the semantically unmarked status of the latter in the text suggests an identification of the latter mode of economic organisation with the prevailing status quo. In this context, it may be argued that the central concept in the text's system of signification is not so much the environment as the global system of production and exchange that lies at the centre of late modernity's economic organisation.

While the text contains no explicit reference to capitalism, the prevailing mode of production and exchange is nevertheless omnipresent, rendered – in similar fashion to the environment – by means of metonymic references to retail chains and brands. Viewed in this context, the reference to "Corporate Cola" in the text (lines 302-304) takes on an additional significance. The Coca Cola brand has long been identified as one of the symbols of global capitalism *par excellence*, and as such, it has been a target for various forms of protest in recent years by the international anti-capitalist movement (Klein, 2001). In the context of the dichotomy between the reformist and radical strains of environmental discourse identified by various writers (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002; Autio et al, 2009), the reference aligns the text firmly with the latter.

Conclusions

As stated in the introduction, the current project set out to ask certain questions regarding the phenomenon of green consumption. These questions were framed in terms of accountability for environmental problems, and of the implications of green consumption for the exercise of power. In order to answer these questions, the project placed an emphasis upon the way in which the concept of environment is constructed in green consumer discourse, and on the way in which various modes of agency are portrayed within this discourse.

As anticipated in the literature review, the concept of the environment that emerges from the data is problematic. In many respects, the environment is absent from the text as a central signifying concept. Rather, in its place, we see the notion of a totalising mode of economic production and exchange, characterised in terms of oppositions between local and global, small and large, and good and evil. The preponderance of metonymic representation in the text, while grounded in a pragmatic system of cause and effect, is strongly indicative of the difficulty faced by the consumer in relating individual actions to specific consequences on a global scale.

The literature review identified the possibility of individual empowerment through the exercise of consumer choice as one of the main themes emerging from the Foucauldian analyses of green consumption prevalent in recent constructivist contributions to the field. This notion was criticised on the basis that it tends to concentrate on self-empowerment at the expense of questions of environmental policy. In many ways, the present analysis corroborates this criticism. While the text attributes a definite role for the individual in exercising power over environmental consequences, this role is defined in terms of political action rather than through the exercise of consumer choice.

The representation of individual agency emerging from the text is complex and in many ways contradictory. While the text portrays individual choices as being made within a context of ethical accountability, this aspect is balanced against the pragmatic limitations entailing from the finite range of products and services available in the marketplace. Thus, for example, while individuals may seek to limit their petrol consumption, the extent to which this is possible is heavily dependent upon the availability of public transport services. Similarly, the feasibility of purchasing ethically produced clothing is severely limited by the difficulty and expense involved in sourcing such items. In this sense, the individual consumer is portrayed as relatively powerless in comparison to governments and multinational corporations.

The literature review also suggested that our understanding of green consumption might be enhanced by drawing on certain critical notions of language posited by poststructuralist and post-modernist theorists. Once again, the analysis bears out this suggestion. The central finding in this context is elusive character of the concept of the environment in green consumer discourse. In an important sense, the global character of catastrophic environmental risk is such that, like the Lacanian order of the Real, it defies signification. In structural terms, the text demonstrates the interchangeability in the semiotics of green consumer discourse of environmental consequences with the global system of production and exchange that is largely responsible for bringing them about.

What lessons may be drawn from the present study in terms of environmental policy? First, the data illustrates the problems facing consumers in making purchasing decisions on the basis of currently available information, which is frequently inadequate. While detailed information is available from specialist publication such as Ethiscore, the complexity of the supply chain – as evidenced by the complex relationships between organisations and brands – means that even dedicated research is unable to provide consumers with an unequivocal basis for environmentally ethical purchasing decisions. In this respect, the data largely supports the view propounded by Autio et al (2009) that consumers require not more information, but greater clarity with regard to environmental priorities.

Second, with regard to the possibilities of green consumption for furthering environmental ends, the data contains little suggestion that ethical purchasing alone may constitute an effective strategy for change. The analysis suggests that the green consumer, rather than feeling a sense of empowerment through ethical purchasing, stands relatively powerless in comparison to the corporate and governmental interests responsible for overseeing the global system of production and exchange. In this sense, conventional readings of mainstream consumer discourse emphasising empowerment through choice may be seen to exhibit a degree of naiveté. While ethical purchasing remains meaningful and valid as a personal response to environmental problems, it is likely to be less effective as a strategy that concerted action such as political lobbying.

Project Review

Choice of topic

The discourse of green consumerism was selected as a topic for study for two main reasons. First, as emphasised in the introduction and literature review, the impact of consumption on the environment is an object of growing concern in contemporary society. Given the increasing level of consideration devoted to environmental impacts in academic circles and discussions of public policy, as well as in the popular media, the subject was considered to have considerable topical interest. The researcher is of the opinion that issues such as anthropogenic climate change, diminishing biodiversity, and environmental pollution constitute a very real threat to the quality of life of future generations of humanity, and that urgent action is required in order to allay these threats. The desirability of producing knowledge that may contribute in some way to such action constitutes a fundamental aspect of the ethical basis for the project.

Second, aside from considerations of environmental policy, the subject of consumer culture as a whole was felt by researcher to be of considerable interest from an anthropological and social psychological perspective. In this context, it is worth noting that the academic study of marketing and advertising has consistently employed ideas from psychology and cultural anthropology since its advent in the post-war period. Conversely, many cultural theorists, including Baudrillard (1996; 1998) and Bourdieu (2010), have noted the central importance of consumption in the creation of contemporary social identities. For the researcher – who has both studied sociology and social anthropology, and worked for several years in market research - the relationship between consumption and cultural identity is an area of ongoing interest.

Given this background, it is also relevant to note that the researcher has devoted considerable thought in recent years to what may be termed the eco-politics of consumption. While not affiliated to any political parties or ecological interest groups, the researcher is broadly sympathetic to the aims of the environmental movement as a whole. Nevertheless, the personal desire to 'make a difference' by greening personal consumption has always been balanced in the researcher's mind with a level of scepticism regarding the efficacy of such action. Consequently, the present study is partly grounded in a desire to explore the phenomenological tensions that exists between personal actions and global, systemic problems.

Project design and methodology

One of the first problems encountered in the project was that of devising an epistemologically coherent strategy for data collection. One difficulty in this respect was the validity of the concept of the 'green consumer' as a distinct sociological category. As noted in the literature review, the transition of green consumerism from minority to mainstream concern, and the heterogeneity of different conceptions of green consumerism, both render this category problematic. Nevertheless, it was decided to proceed with the recruitment of respondents through local Green Party and environmental interest group contacts as this was deemed the

most pragmatic strategy for enlisting the help of individuals with an ongoing commitment to environmental issues.

While the project design allowed for the possibility of a low response rate by seeking to recruit a relatively high number of respondents, the eventual response was in some respects disappointing, with only one completed journal received. To a certain extent, this result reflected an underestimation on the researcher's part of the level of time that would be required for cultivating working relationships with respondents. The difficulty of establishing and maintaining contact with multiple respondents was compounded by a number of factors, including a lack of environmental groups in the researcher's own locality; a reliance on email for initial contact, and the difficulty in certain cases of establishing follow-up contact by telephone; and by the coincidence of the fieldwork period with the summer holiday season. Nevertheless, the experience provided the researcher with a number of valuable lessons on the practical aspects of managing a fieldwork project of this nature, and it was concluded that a better response rate could have been produced with a greater investment of time for cultivating field relationships.

The adequacy of a single piece of data as material for analysis was also a question of some concern. In this context, it should be noted that the project was initially conceived as an ethnographic study, and that it was originally hoped to base the analysis on a minimum of six respondent accounts. As the project progressed, it became increasingly apparent to the researcher that a close linguistic analysis of results based on the methods developed by Fairclough (1992, 2003) and Halliday (1994) would be desirable, and that such methods are more appropriate to a smaller corpus of data. Arguably, one of the main weaknesses of the project remains its reliance on a single text for conclusions regarding a complex and heterogeneous field of cultural activity. Nevertheless, this aspect of the project needs to be understood in the context of wider debates regarding the possibilities and limitations of discourse analysis in the social sciences (Wetherell, 1990). While it would be misguided to take a single text as representative of possible utterances, this criticism may equally be applied to analyses based on multiple texts.

However, one major limitation of the project arose from an unanticipated consequence of the chosen method of data collection. As material was solicited from respondents in the form of a consumer journal, it may be argued that the resulting data contained an inherent bias towards what was identified in the literature review as the reformist conception of green consumerism. This bias only became full apparent in the analysis, when the grammatical structures typical of this genre were identified. The analysis sought to identify ways in which the text contained evidence of attempts to modify and subvert this reformist bias by means of rhetorical strategies. Nevertheless, it may be argued that the selection of this particular strategy for data collection was a weakness of the project, and that a more comprehensive set of conclusions might have been obtained by analysing data from published sources.

Analytic method and epistemology

One particular challenge arising from the project lay in the breadth of academic literature in the field of green consumption, and consequently, great selectivity was required in choosing work to discuss in the literature review. While a number of methodologies might justifiably have been chosen to develop the project, it was felt that the overwhelming tendency of recent discourse analytic studies to concentrate on Foucauldian models of self-empowerment

revealed an idealist bias. Consequently, the project was conceived as a contribution to the debate based on a more materialist conception of discourse. To this end, the work of Fairclough (1992, 2003) on discourse and ideology, and that of Halliday (1990) on the relationship between language and the means of production, were deemed to provide the basis of a potentially novel contribution to the debate.

During the analytic phase of the project, however, certain difficulties became apparent with this materialist approach. These problems arose mainly from the notable absence from the text of any explicit discussion of processes of environmental degradation. It should be noted that this particular aspect of the data might have perhaps been avoided with a more structured briefing document – although, in itself, it provided interesting material for analysis. The interpretation arising from this material tended to concentrate on problems of representation, and in particular the use of metonymy to suggest environmental consequences by means of reference to their effects. While the researcher felt that this line of argument was of potential value in the context of the ongoing debate regarding green consumption, it was also concluded that the materialist emphasis of the project as originally conceived was not adhered to with strict consistency, and that this constitutes another major failing of the project.

In conclusion, in view of the failings and weaknesses noted above, the project must be regarded as at best only partially successful. Nevertheless, the researcher strongly feels that the lessons provided by these shortcomings may be of value in suggesting directions in which a similar line of research might be taken forward for future study. In particular, it is felt that the range of analytic concepts and methods employed might usefully applied in future research to interrogate samples of literature from sources concerned with the determination and implementation of environmental policy, such as political party manifestoes, reports by environmental think-tanks, and government departments.

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