

Pain tolerance and its relationship with sustainable consumption: A reflective and philosophical argument

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable consumption and life style is one of the important ways of fighting climate change. However, existing literature on sustainable consumption ignored the role “pain tolerance levels” of a person play in sustainable consumption practices. In this paper, the authors present their reflections, observations and philosophical arguments on how pain tolerance level of a person could affect their sustainable consumption practices/choices. We argue that the higher the pain tolerance levels of a person, the more enabled they will be to adopt life style and consumption habits which are environment friendly.

Keywords: Comfort, luxury, pain tolerance, pleasure, factors determining sustainable consumption, ethical consumption, sustainable consumption, climate change, life style change.

INTRODUCTION: -

There are many ways of fighting climate change like 1) development of new technologies which will reduce the use of natural resources and emit less pollutants 2) imposition of rules, regulations and standards by government 3) making consumers consume less (less production means less consumption of natural resources), consume responsibly (less waste in consumption), increase the consumption of environment friendly products and avoid using products which are harmful to the environment...all these behaviours can be grouped under the term “sustainable consumption” 4) develop a life style (i.e. the way people live) which is environmentally friendly. This paper is primarily focused on sustainable consumption and life styles (3 and 4).

In the 1994 Oslo symposium of consumption, sustainable consumption has been defined as “the use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, 1994). In this paper when we refer to “sustainable consumption and life style”, we mean a combination of behaviours which include “not buying and using products and services which are harmful to the environment (using products and services which are environment friendly), minimizing waste (for example: -not wasting food and electricity), minimizing the levels of consumption (avoiding unnecessary consumption), adopting life styles/living in such a manner (for example: -cycling to work instead of taking a car) which will minimize the use of natural resources and reduce the negative impact humans are causing to the environment”.

Social scientists have been studying the factors which influence sustainable consumption for the past few decades. However, one major factor that has been overlooked in sustainable consumption research is the role of “pain tolerance level” of a person and how it affects sustainable consumption and lifestyle.

LITERATURE REVIEW: -

One of the most researched factors which influence sustainable consumption is the environmental concern of a person. Simmons and Widman found that environmental concern of a person is a major factor in predicting a pro-environment behaviour like recycling (Simmons & Widmar, 1990). In a study done by Chan, it has been found that people who are environmentally concerned tend to purchase products which are environment friendly (Chan, 2008). “Knowledge” is also another important factors which can help predicting green consumer

behaviour. Consumers who are aware and have knowledge about the environmental effects of their consumption, will be motivated to practice environment friendly consumption patterns (Peattie, 2010). "Perceived consumer effectiveness", which is defined as "a measure of the extent to which a respondent believes that an individual consumer can be effective in pollution abatement" (Kinnear, James R. Taylor, & Ahmed, 1974), has been found to have an effect on the consumer's attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control which in turn affect the purchase of environment friendly products (Kang, Liu, & Kim, 2013). Jakob Kronenberg and colleagues concluded that philosophical reflection is the most important element in simple living (Kronenberg & Natsuyo Iida, 2011). Substantial amount of research has been done on values of the people and their environment friendly behaviour. Thøgersen and Ölander found that value priorities of people play an important role in sustainable consumption patterns (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2002). According to Stern and colleagues, people with altruistic values are more likely to engage in behaviour that is pro-environmental (Stern, Dietz, Kalof, & Guagnano, 1995). "Scepticism" of customers, whether the claims made by green products are true or not, is also another factor which affects sustainable consumption. Albayrak and colleagues found that customers who have high environmental concern and less scepticism are more likely to engage in behaviours that are pro-environmental (Albayrak, Aksoy, & Caber, 2013). Prices of products and services is also another factor which affects pro-environmental behaviour. Gleim and colleagues found price to be one of the greatest barriers to green product adoption (Gleim, Smith, Andrews, & Cronin Jr, 2013). D'Souza and colleagues found that consumers are price-sensitive when they are buying green products (D'Souza, Taghian, Lamb, & Peretiatko, 2006). "Availability of green products and services" has also been found to be one of the major factors affecting sustainable consumption. Vermeir and colleagues found in their study that consumers were willing to purchase green products but due to non-availability of green products their willingness to buy green products is not translating into actions (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). Income of consumers has also been found to be one of the factors affecting purchasing green products. In a study done by Davies and colleagues, it has been found that consumer's level of disposable income plays a major role when it comes to buying organic products (Davies, Titterton, & Cochrane, 1995). Brand popularity and brand preferences of consumers is also another factor which affects the purchase of green products (Young, Hwang, McDonald, & Oates, 2010). Glegg and colleagues found that consumers will be less willing to buy green products if they are unfamiliar with the brand (Glegg, Richards, Heard, & Dawson, 2005). "Eco-labelling", labels on the products which say that products and services have been produced in an environmentally friendly manner, also plays a role in green purchase behaviour (Thøgersen, 2000). Retailers also play an important role in the purchase of green products. Quelch and Harding say that retailers act as promoters of products (Quelch & Harding, 1996) which in turn could affect the purchase of green products. Consumption and its relationship with social needs like "status" is also a factor which determines consumer choices when it comes to the purchase of green products (Janssen & Jager, 2002). Legislations, regulations, standards and policies taken up by governments to promote sustainable consumptions also play a role in sustainable consumption (Elena, 2016).

Review of literature on factors affecting sustainable consumption indicates that the relationship between pain tolerance level of a person and its relationship with sustainable consumption and sustainable life style has not been studied yet.

Theoretical Background: -

Pleasure and Pain principle given by Sigmund Freud, says that human actions are directed towards the pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain (Freud & Strachey, 1961). In other words, people are motivated in pursuit of pleasure and to avoid pain. This principle acts as the theoretical background of this article.

Operant conditioning theory given by B.F. Skinner uses reinforcements (Positive reinforcement- giving something "pleasant" that gives "pleasure"; Negative reinforcement- removing something "unpleasant" that gives "pain") and punishments (Positive punishment- Giving something "unpleasant" which gives "pain"; Negative punishment- remove something "pleasant" that gives us "pleasure") to modify behaviors and learning (McLeod, 2018).

In this paper, we first try to understand the concept of pain tolerance, and then try to explain the importance of pain tolerance and its role in sustainable consumption.

Pain Tolerance: -

Pain tolerance level of a person refers to the level of pain that a person can bear without consciously feeling the pain. For example: - A person who carries 50kg on his back every day, usually has a capacity of carrying 5kg weight on his back without feeling lot of pain (or the person will find it much easier than someone who does not have the habit of carrying weights on his back). Another example: - Running 5kms for the first time, could be a painful experience for a person who does not have regular physical activity. However, if that person practices running for few months, then he/she won't be feeling the same amount of pain that he/she felt when he/she ran

5kms for the first time. In other words, the person's "pain tolerance" increased (i.e. their body got used to the pain that it won't be painful anymore). Pain tolerance means, the person's ability to bear pain is so high that he does not feel the pain up to a level of pain (their pain tolerance levels).

Pleasure and pain are two sides of the same coin. Losing something that gives us pleasure gives us pain (i.e. losing pleasure is pain). Not getting something that could give us pleasure gives us pain. By and large, most people generally get used to something that gives them pleasure and though what they use do not give them pleasure anymore, stopping to consume them could give them pain (for example: - alcohol consumption). Another example: - Moving into a big house (from a small house) makes us feel good for some time, but after some time we get used to it and we need a bigger house to feel good (pleasure) again. Moving to a smaller house which we used to live before could become uncomfortable (painful). In other words, people get used to "comfort" (of a bigger house...let's call it house no 1) which makes them feel good for some time...they get used to it...they need something more (even bigger house/luxurious house...let's call it house no 2) comfortable to feel good. They get used to it as well. And moving back into the original house (from house no 1 to house no 2) will make them feel uncomfortable (painful). {So, to derive pleasure continuously, we need to consume more and more or bigger and bigger...and consuming more and more requires more production, which in turn increases the uses of natural resources and emissions}.

There is a close relationship between what a person calls as "luxury", "comfort", "need" and pain tolerance levels of that person. As people's incomes grow up, and as they go on fulfilling their levels of needs (necessities, comforts and luxuries), they call/define "luxury to be (as) a comfort", "comfort to be a necessity". For ex: - A friend of mine used to travel in sleeper class train (a train coach without air conditioning) and used to consider travelling in a flight to be a "luxury" and travelling in a AC coach to be "comfort", And as his income rose he started travelling in 2nd AC class (A train coach with air conditioning), as his income level rose further, he started travelling in "flight". Now (after getting used to travelling in flights), he calls travelling in a flight to be a "necessity" because he says "It's too painful to travel in a sleeper class train now because I got used to travelling in flights). In other words, as he got used to luxuries and comforts, his pain tolerance levels decreased, as a result he finds it difficult (more painful than when he did not got used to travelling in flights) to travel in trains. {As people get used to "luxury" and call it "necessity" and as production and consumption of luxury products and services require more resources and emit more emissions, we can say that low pain tolerance levels of people make choose products which are less environment friendly, in other words, they find it difficult to choose those products and life styles which are environment friendly).

Pain Tolerance and Its Relationship with Sustainable Consumption

When me (one of the authors of this article) and my friends were young (almost until the age of 18 or 19) we used to ride our cycles (bicycles) a lot. We used to ride for 4 or 5kms to go to the nearby city to eat food/delicacies we liked. Sometimes, 2 or 3 friends used to ride on the same cycle (one sitting on the front and another at the back of the cycle). Our bicycles were our legs at that age. After reaching the age of 18, many of my friends started buying motor cycles to ride (use), while I did not. After few months, they got used to the "comfort" of riding the motor cycles (their pain tolerance decreased) and were using their motor cycles even to travel a distance of 300 meters (to the place of loo where we usually go to), because they found it uncomfortable to walk/ride on bicycle for a distance of 300 meters (but I was very comfortable because I did not got used to the comfort of motor cycle. My pain tolerance was intact, while their pain tolerance reduced). In other words, because they got used to the comfort of using motor cycles, they lost their pain tolerance, and started using motor cycles even for travelling a distance of 300 meters, which contributes to pollution.

One more observation is, when we used to use bicycles we used to go to the nearest city once or twice in a day (to eat, to buy something, and for other purposes) because riding cycle used to consume physical energy, but after my friends brought motor cycles, the frequency of going to the city increased (which means...more pollution), in other words, **our life styles (consumption pattern) changed**. If my friends had not gotten used to the "comfort" (i.e. if their pain tolerance levels had not reduced) of motor cycles their contribution towards pollution would have been lesser (i.e. riding on bicycles would have been relatively easier for them if they had not gotten used to the comfort of motor cycles and their contribution towards pollution would have been lesser).

When I (one of the authors) moved to the university accommodation where I had hot water facility for taking bath (with the use of a geyser, an appliance which uses electricity to heat the water), I got used to the "comfort" of hot water, but when I went back to home in vacation, where I did not have hot water facility, I found it uncomfortable (my pain tolerance level decreased because I got used to the comfort of hot water) to take bath with normal temperature water (which I was comfortable taking bath with before I got used to the comfort of hot water). If I had not gotten used to the comfort of "hot water", I would not have used geyser at university accommodation, and my contribution towards pollution (electricity generation causes pollution) would have been lesser.

Whenever I went to college, instead of carrying my steel water bottle which is heavier than a plastic bottle and more uncomfortable carry, I used to buy a plastic water bottle (more pollution than if I had carried my steel water bottle) after reaching the campus. Because I did not want to bear the weight of a steel bottle (pain point), and preferred the comfortable option of buying a water bottle at the campus, I was contributing more pollution and environmental hazard with plastic bottle i.e. because my pain tolerance was not high enough to bear the pain of carrying the weight of steel water bottle, I chose to buy a plastic bottle which was not environmentally friendly.

When I was in school, I used to buy second hand/used text books from my seniors, but a friend of mine always brought new books because he felt ashamed for using second hand books (usually poor students who cannot afford to buy new books buy old books...so, buying old books is associated with poverty which consequently become a symbol of inferiority). He/she liked reading from new books and felt uncomfortable (pain) reading from second hand books. His source of pain was not physical but psychological. If he had not found it uncomfortable to buy old books, then he would have chosen to buy old books, which would have been an environmentally friendly option.

For some people, travelling (in public transport systems) with other people is uncomfortable (it is their source of pain). So, travelling alone becomes their comfort. Instead of taking/using shared modes of transports (public buses, trains etc.) they prefer travelling alone (travelling alone contributes to more pollution than when a person uses public transport)...A friend of mine, when she did not have a car, used to travel in Metro (public transport). But after she brought a car, she says that she uses her car to "save time". So, for her, spending extra time to travel in public transport is the uncomfortable aspect (pain point). For her, the benefit of saved time is more valuable than the cost of pollution that she is contributing to by travelling in the car. If she can bear the pain of spending some extra time in her life by using public transport, then she could reduce the pollution that she is contributing by using her car.

In India, travelling in a train requires more time and is more painful (uncomfortable) than travelling in a plane. For example: - Travelling from Hyderabad to Delhi in train could take around 24 hours in train, while travelling the same distance in a plane could take around 3 hours. Once people get used to the habit of travelling in plane, they say travelling in train is "unbearable", it means that their ability to bear pain (the uncomfortable train journey...both physical aspect of sitting for long...and the mental aspect of getting bored) reduced. It becomes so unbearable for them that they (few of my friends) end up saying flights are "necessary" (new technology/products/services change the way society function...so, in-fact they do become necessary or we come up with convincing justifications to say that they are necessary).

Some people buy new clothes very frequently, even when the previously brought clothes are in good condition. They buy new clothes because they give them "happiness" (pleasure). For them, the happiness they get from buying new clothes is more valuable/important than the environmental impact caused by the productions of these new clothes (electricity used in the production of cloth, pesticides used to grow cotton etc.) they are causing by buying frequently. Not buying clothes frequently is an uncomfortable (pain/denying pleasure) for them. If they can learn to control this behavior, they could contribute less to environmental damage.

Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted saying "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed." It makes sense in the context of changing climate scenario. In the process of never-ending pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain, people seek "more and more" (to make themselves happy for a moment) which requires more and more use of natural resources which could release more and more harmful emissions into the environment.

FINDING

People with higher pain tolerance levels are more "enabled" (than people with lower tolerance) to make consumption and life style choices which are environment friendly.

SOCIAL IMPLICATION/ SUGGESTION

Instead of pursuing luxury and comfort (which consume more natural resources and cause more pollution...which will eventually considered as "necessities" by those who get used to them), we (people of society) should try to increase our pain tolerance levels (both physical and mental), which will enable us to make consumption and life style choices which are environment friendly.

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