
Consumption patterns as correlates of environmental degradation in Nigeria

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Abstract: Apart from natural factors, population explosion and technology (as agents of creative destruction), consumption behaviours are considered serious sources of environmental degradation in Nigerian cities. Paradoxically, not much attention has been given to the myriad antecedents of environmental despoliation despite their dangerous implications. Therefore, this paper examines the aspects of environmental degradation, drawing particular attention to the various means through which Nigerian consumers contaminate their cities. Attention is drawn to the blatant neglect of these problems and the solutions suggested on how to address them. The paper has some implications for environmental management, public policy and consumer research.

1 Introduction

Environmental degradation concerns are gaining increasing momentum among policy makers and researchers. The present publication represents a pragmatic intellectual search for lasting solutions to the environmental problems faced by Nigerian cities. However, one area that appears to have been underresearched is the ethical consumption dimension of the problem. Thus, while corporate activities and natural factors are acknowledged sources of environmental degradation, the social responsibility of consumers towards the environment seems to be neglected. Our consumption pattern can be made environmentally friendly. However, the overarching question is ‘how?’

Without a doubt, urbanisation, technology and the modern exchange process are some of the pertinent factors that gave rise to a new pattern of consumption in Nigeria. For instance, traditional African consumption was closely limited to organic farm and forest output, whose wastes occur in the form of husks, leaves and other organic ‘decomposables’ which are often used as organic manure for agricultural production. However, western culture and consumption-related practices have profoundly affected what Nigerians eat and how they live, including the population concentration in urban centres. This would appear to have encouraged the massive build-up of nondegradable toxic wastes with the concomitant environmental hazards to Nigerian cities. A laboratory classification of wastes in the Nigerian environment indicated the presence of dangerous environmental hazards such as Sodium (Na), Zinc (Zn) and Promethium (Pr) (Sangodoyin and Ipadeola, 2000). These elements have increased as a result of recent consumption habits and poor environmental consciousness on the part of Nigerians. If unchecked, the trend is likely to increase largely because of the increasing exposure of

Nigerians to new Anglo-centric consumption behaviours and patterns of living that are increasingly modelled alongside westernised systems, particularly in the context of globalisation and weak environmental management.

Undoubtedly, waste generation as a phenomenon of modern society transverses both the developed and developing countries of the world. However, while the developed countries have developed a reasonable awareness about their environment and have allowed modern technological advances and strict environmental control standards to bear on the management of waste generation (obviously to mitigate environmental degradation), the developing countries pay minimal attention to the phenomenon. Nigeria is undoubtedly a notable member of the latter. The activities of multinationals and profit-thirsty corporate institutions are not helping matters either! Accordingly, Jegasothy (1999, pp.1027–1055) posited, “the situation among developing countries is quite precarious as compared to developed countries. Rapid population growth and destructive activities increasingly degrade all forms of bio physical system that human life depends on and ultimately causes economic and social instabilities.” If this trend continues, we risk losing the environment before we become conscious and committed to environmental preservation. By then, we may not have any environment to protect.

Admittedly, part of these ‘destructive activities’ could be as a result of the new forms of wasteful consumption occasioned by accelerating exchange processes. Indeed, marketing has been accused as a first-order culprit in this act. Accordingly, Yam-Tang and Chan (1998, pp.356–362) reported: “Some see marketing as partly responsible for damaging the environment because the activities of marketing have increased consumption and waste through advertising incentives, product differentiation and shortening of product life cycles.” In a study, Grunert (1993) found that between 30% to 40% of environment degradation has been brought about by the consumption activities of private households. Also, consumers, by their consumption pattern and purchase behaviour, reinforce the environmental degradation of firms by not ‘punishing’ environmentally unfriendly firms and ‘rewarding’ environment-friendly firms (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Also, the literature is replete with evidence to suggest that the depletion of natural resources and pollution of the physical environment are the primary consequences of increased consumption (Jegasothy, 1999).

Despite all these accusations on consumers and marketing, it has been theorised that consumers and the marketing system could play vital roles in controlling environmental degradation. Accordingly, the recognition of this inevitable role by consumers has been echoed in the literature (McGougall, 1993; Wasik, 1992). Specifically, Chan and Lau (2002, pp.338–357) believed that “if consumers exhibit a high degree of ecological concern and channel it into eco-friendly purchasing and consumption behaviour, it is likely that profit-driven enterprises will be strongly motivated to adopt the concept of green marketing (ethical purchase and consumption behaviour) in their operations”. It is against this backdrop that this paper attempts to discuss the complex issue of the degradation of Nigerian cities from the often-isolated perspective of ethical consumption. The general aim is to generate new ideas on how to transform degraded Nigerian cities into habitable cities for sustainable economic development and, perhaps most importantly, preserve our environment for future generations.

2 Green/Ethical consumption in perspective

The search for a lasting antidote to environmental degradation seems to have concentrated more on such contributory agents as natural forces and industrial/corporate activities as if they represent the only source of environmental degradation. While they are known causes of general environmental degradation, it is our view that consumption pattern/behaviour could be a major source of environmental degradation, particularly for Nigerian cities. This obvious neglect of consumer behaviour as a possible correlate of environmental degradation has promoted excessive emphasis on corporate social responsibility as if it is the sole cause of man-made environmental degradation. The perspective of consumer social responsibility in the context of ethical consumption in Nigeria would appear to have been underresearched, going by the overt emphasis on corporate social responsibility.

Ethical consumers represent those users and/or purchasers of products who can avoid products that are likely to endanger their health or the health of others or cause significant damage to the environment during manufacture, use or disposal (Strong, 1996; Elkington and Hailes, 1989). Research in this area attempts to determine the level of social responsibility exhibited in the purchase and consumption behaviour of consumers, as it affects the immediate and even remote environment. Accordingly, the impact of consumers in the deterioration of Nigerian cities would appear to have been neglected. Yet, in Nigeria, as in most countries, urbanisation and urbanism, technology and an evolving culture have given impetus to high concentrations of consumers in the cities. Such concentrations will continue to increase if no control is applied through the dispersal of development nodes or centres which generate sociocommercial activities. The available statistics show that in 1963, 19% of the Nigerian population was concentrated in the cities; this increased to 25% in 1990 (FOS, 1996) and has continued to increase ever since. This increase in urbanisation without a corresponding increase in waste management has increased the rate at which toxic wastes are generated in Nigerian cities, thus transforming them into epidemic-prone slumps. Yet, Sangodoyin and Ipadeola (2000), in their study of the composition of household wastes in Nigeria, identified some hazardous wastes that hitherto were uncommon.

Evidently, the growing awareness of the consequences of consumption on the environment has increased in most parts of the world. This is reflected in the emergence of such appellations as green marketing, environmental marketing, ethical consumption, *etc.*, that are replete in the literature. The same could not be said of Africa, where environmental consciousness seems to be obscured by population explosion and poverty. The population of the world is placed at 6 billion. Africa's 3% population growth rate represents the highest. Its living standards are lowest in the world. The growth rate for Asia and Latin America are 2% and 2.3%, respectively. This contrasts sharply with the growth rate of 0.6% of developed countries, which further exposes the consequences of uncontrolled rapid population growth in Africa on the continent's economic development. Incidentally, Nigeria's over 120 million people represents close to 25% of the African population, which exposes Nigeria to the highest likelihood of shock arising from consumption – pattern-based environmental degradation in the cities most of these people migrate to. Going by the fast declining purchasing power of Nigerian consumers, their insensitivity to environmental issues and ethical considerations in their consumption

behaviour is likely to worsen. Yet, consumers' attitudes towards ethical consumption is known to influence their choice of products being offered by firms (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001; Schlegelmilch *et al.*, 1996; Chan and Lau, 2002).

The question confronting researches in this area is whether the consumers who are conscious of the environmental impact of the products offered by companies reward such organisations that are environment-friendly and punish those firms that are hostile to the environment through their purchase and consumption behaviour patterns. It would appear logical for ethical consumers to buy more of green products or even pay more for such products and despise products that deplete the biophysical environment by avoiding the consumption of such products, even when they appear cheaper. By doing so, consumers would 'compel' organisations to stick to environmental standards or face the ugly consequence of market boycott.

The pertinent questions demanding concrete answers in our present situation are:

- Do Nigerian consumers consider ethical issues such as environmental issues in their consumption and purchasing behaviour?
- Do they display any sense of social responsibility going by the manner in which they use and discard products in the environment?

3 Social responsibility in consumer behaviour

The social responsibility and societal marketing practices of firms have been researched extensively (Kotler, 1972; Hunt and Chonko, 1984; Laczniak and Murphy, 1993; Amine, 1996). Although consumers' perspective of social responsibility (especially as it affects their consumption behaviour and environmental degradation) seems to have received very little attention, few of the studies conducted in this area have produced interesting and conflicting revelations (Ottman, 1992; Peattie, 1992; Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Part of these conflicts has manifested in the form of an attitude-behaviour gap (Roberts, 1996; Simon, 1995). The implication of this state of affairs is that in most situations where consumers would prefer to buy environmentally friendly goods, only very few would translate this into action (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000), as economic and other pressing matters seem to overshadow environmental consideration.

Other studies have identified information as a vital determinant of ethical purchasing and consumption. This is consistent with what exists in the literature on consumer purchase behaviour. Sproles *et al.* (1978) theorised that information represents a vital input in the consumer's decision-making process. This applies to their purchase and consumption of goods that may be considered environmentally unfriendly. This does not, however, mean that adequate information can automatically translate to ethical consumption (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). In a similar study, Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) concluded that ethical considerations might not be the most dominant consideration in a purchase situation.

Another important evidence in the literature is the issue of 'vested interest'. The study of Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) emphasised the importance of ethical/unethical behaviour, which directly impacts on consumers themselves. It is hypothesised that when consumers are aware of the direct implications of their purchase/consumption patterns on

their health, for instance, they would tend to avoid such behaviours. On the other hand, where the danger of such consumption is on others or the physical environment, as the case may be, they are likely to condone such behaviours if it favours them.

To contribute to filling the apparent gap existing in the literature and explain the degradation of Nigerian cities from the perspective of ethical purchase/consumption behaviours, this paper studies a sample of Nigerian consumers drawn from Anambra state in south-eastern Nigeria. Part of the questions that would be answered include the following:

- Does sophisticated consumption translate to sophisticated ethical purchase/consumption behaviours among Nigerian consumers?
- How can we explain the unethical purchase and consumption patterns of Nigerians, particularly those with implications for the orderly disposal of wastes?
- In which ways do Nigerian consumers' consumption patterns contribute to the degradation of Nigerian cities?
- What is the relationship between the consumption patterns of households and industrial users and waste management authorities?
- Do Nigerian consumers boycott products that are considered environmentally unfriendly?

4 Methodology

This writer used Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and personal interviews to elicit the needed information for the paper. The merit of this approach has been acknowledged widely. It has been used extensively in previous researches of this nature (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001); it has proved useful in studying the complex behaviour of consumers (Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Greenbaum, 1993). It offers speed, flexibility, economy and rich data generation (Carrigan and Attalla, 2000).

Three group discussions were held. The members of the FGDs were drawn from three cities (Awka, Nnewi and Onitsha), all in Anambra state. There were four participants in each group. In the literature, 8 to 12 participants have been recommended for a group (Macfarlane, 1972; Bellenger *et al.*, 1976; Tynan and Drayton, 1988; Morgan, 1992). However, a smaller number may still be ideal for some kind of study without loss of information (Mendes de Almeida, 1980). Similar studies have utilised numbers outside the widely recommended ones (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). The groups were divided into 'all male', 'all female' and 'male-female'. The grouping of participants by gender was done with the intention of identifying any influence of sex in attitudes and behaviours. The influence of gender on group interaction has generated wide ranges of contention in the literature (Thorne and Henley, 1975). All the participants in the groups possess university education and work in tertiary institutions. This choice was made due to the suspected effect of education and positive attitudes towards the environment and its protection.

5 Findings and discussion

One of the objectives of the study is to establish whether sophisticated consumption translates to sophisticated ethical consumption. To operationalise the term ‘sophisticated’, we defined it as the level of product/company information at the disposal of the consumer. Our choice of education as a variable for selecting respondents was partly made due to the assumption that the members of this group are more likely to possess better knowledge that is needed to discuss the subject under consideration. Six product classifications in a similar study by Sangodoyin and Ipadeola (2000) were used in the present study due to their perceived relevance to the environment under study. These include:

- household containers and cans
- wood
- plastics (including packaging)
- glass (including bottles)
- paper products
- household cleaning agents, *e.g.*, bleach and stain remover.

A conscious attempt was made to assess the participants’ knowledge and views relative to these classes of products as potential sources of environmental degradation. The average weights assigned to these classes of products are displayed in the Table 1.

Table 1 Consumers’ perceptions of the negative environmental impact of selected products

<i>Product class</i>	<i>Weight as an indicator of negative environmental impact</i>	<i>Interpretations</i>
Wood	0	Not environmentally harmful
Household containers and cans	3	Harmful to the environment
Plastics	5	Very much harmful to the environment
Glass (including bottles)	1	Not seriously harmful to the environment
Paper	0	Not environmentally harmful
Household cleaning agents	1	Not seriously harmful to the environment

Table 1 indicates that the consumers perceive plastics as a major source of environmental pollution in Nigerian cities. While this is significant, it is important to observe that items such as detergents, stain removers, bleaching agents, *etc.*, classified as household cleaning agents are not considered a significant source of environmental degradation. Yet, these products have been found to be a significant source of environmental degradation (especially underground water pollution) in Nigeria (Saugodoyin and Ipadeola, 2000; Sangodoyin, 1993).

Attempts to explain the effect of this knowledge on consumers’ consumption patterns, provided contradictory responses among almost all the participants. For instance, we tried to see how the knowledge of plastics as a major environmental hazard affects how

consumers dispose of plastic wrappings. The majority of the participants do not seem to translate this knowledge into action. This is reflected in their obvious lack of consistent discipline in the orderly disposal of such wastes. This would appear to be consistent with the attitude-behaviour gap replete in the literature, which holds that consumers' attitudes hardly translate to action. It further explains the ubiquitous presence of these materials (*e.g.*, 'pure water' packages, bread wrapping, *etc.*) in almost all major Nigerian cities. The economic effects and environmental consequences of these behaviours are better imagined. For instance, a 1996 Federal Office of Statistics estimate puts the long-term annual loss of Nigeria caused by eight environmental problems at US\$5 billion; included in these problems is urban decay. Again, in 2001, multimillion Naira drainage contracts were said to have been executed in the major cities of Anambra under the Erosion Channelisation Programme through the 'Ecological Fund' from the federal government. However, most of the drainages in the city under investigation are now filled to the brim with all sorts of household waste, principally plastics of all sorts, bottles, metal cans and refuse, evidently from indiscriminate and unethical refuse disposal by Nigerian consumers. The same could be true for most other cities in Nigeria.

In the disposal of bottles and cans, most of the female participants said that they gather and resell them periodically. While this could be a good alternative for 'recycling' these wastes, they pose another anti-social problem, as fake manufacturers would use them to store fake or adulterated products.

Efforts to find explanations for this behaviour further elicited defensive arguments on the part of the participants. The most common of these defences hinges on the lacklustre attitude of waste management authorities. The 'mobile consumption' behaviour of most Nigerians is also cited as another serious source of urban environmental degradation. Perhaps the most common is the ubiquitous consumption of 'pure water' and snacks, among others, during traffic hold-ups and in open markets and the habitual littering of the environment with the packets of these products. Incidentally, the waste management authorities seem to be doing nothing about this behaviour. As of 1993/1994, only 12.92% of Nigerians use refuse bins (FOS, 1996).

Another issue that was raised is whether consumers would prefer to patronise products made with degradable materials even at a higher price, thereby encouraging environment-friendly companies and 'punishing' unethical ones. In the first place, none of the participants displayed any knowledge of such products/companies in Nigeria, but they went on to aver that even if these exist, they may not 'in all honesty' prefer such expensive products to a cheaper one for economic considerations. However, where the products have direct impacts on them, such a sacrifice may be made. This suggests that most Nigerian consumers are insensitive to what happens to the quality of the environment.

Several major conclusions can be made from our study:

- Apart from plastics and household cans and containers, the effects of other household wastes on the environment do not seem to be recognised.
- The lacklustre attitude of waste management authorities seem to have negatively affected the psyche of Nigerian consumers in the area of waste disposal.
- In recent times, 'pure-water' packages and other such packages have continued to represent a major source of the environmental degradation of Nigerian cities. This is accentuated by the 'mobile consumption' culture of most Nigerians.

- Most Nigerian consumers do not concretise their intention to protect the environment by reflecting it in their consumption behaviour.
- The consumers' boycott of environmentally unfriendly products is out of the question for Nigerian consumers.
- Nigerian consumers do not believe that the ethical consumption and purchase behaviour of the individual members of society is one way to improve the environmental conditions of Nigerian cities.

6 Conclusion and recommendation

This paper attempted to examine the question of environmental degradation in Nigerian cities from the often-neglected perspective of consumers' responsibility to their environment as demonstrated by their ethical consumption patterns. It would appear that both consumers and waste management authorities have not considered this perspective in pondering environmental management in Nigerian cities. We argue that this option must be explored. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proffered.

An environmental awareness campaign should be pursued with vigour and determination as a tool to condition the attitudes and behaviours of Nigerians towards the environment and unfriendly corporate activities. At present, a majority of Nigerians seem to treat environmental issues with levity. This emanates from their gross ignorance of the environment. Thus, mounting an environmental awareness campaign represents a sure source of stimulating dormant environmental consciousness into a pragmatic movement that would naturally make Nigerians care for their environment. This effort must be integrative, thereby involving all the stakeholders of Nigerian society, including the media, commercial and noncommercial organisations, different levels of government and even Nongovernmental Organisations (NGOs). The Federal Environmental Protection Agency (FEPA) must play a pivotal role in this regard. Accordingly, they should continuously investigate the impact of organisations on the environment and expose any unethical environmental activity with a view to influence consumers' consumption behaviour.

Again, the producers of most consumer goods that pollute Nigerian cities (like 'pure water', among others) should be made to develop practical strategies on environmental protection on an ongoing basis! This should be made a precondition for the renewal of their operating licences.

Perhaps the most urgent need is that of making FEPA and their state counterparts aware of their responsibilities.

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