



Utopias and motivation

In the same way that people are motivated to pursue ideals for the self, they may also be motivated to perform behaviours which move *society* closer to an ideal i.e. a utopia. Recent research (Fernando et al., 2018) has shown that thinking about a utopian society tends to make people more critical of their current society and more motivated to take action to change it.

This motivational effect is also likely to be affected by the kind of utopia a person endorses. Several different themes or prototypes of utopia have been identified in the research literature, but there seem to be two especially prominent themes of utopia in modern Western societies: what we will call the 'Sci-Fi' and 'Green' utopias. The Sci-Fi utopia emphasises material abundance and advanced technology, while the Green utopia emphasises sufficiency and harmony with the natural environment.

Utopias and consumption behaviour

So why is this relevant to consumers? One way in which people might act to move the world or the society they live in closer to an ideal is through their choices of the things they buy. This can happen in two ways: 1) products are presented to consumers as in some way instrumental in changing society (consumer *fantasy*) and 2) consumers are motivated to buy things which they believe contribute positively to the wider world (consumer *activism*).

When it comes to consumer activism, people can do this in several different ways: 1) boycotting or avoiding companies or products which they see as adversely affecting the world, 2) supporting companies or products which are seen as having a positive social

impact, or 3) generally changing their consumption practices to fit

with their notion of an ideal society (e.g. the Slow Food movement)

How do consumers know what to buy?

Consumers often have to make decisions based on limited or even conflicting information. Thus, choosing products which might help to achieve your utopia is difficult. We suggest that consumers may use various cues from marketing and packaging materials to indicate whether purchasing a product will be more or less likely to contribute to achieving a utopian society.

Provenance

A source of information that consumers might use to form these impressions is the 'provenance' communications often found on various products. These communications often come in the form of a narrative and describe where the product comes from and how the product was made (the place, process, people and parts). Consumers may look to these kinds of communications for information about how the product affects the world around them.¹

What do the data say?

A recent study of over 7000 consumers from Australia assessing their preferences across a range of product categories can shed some light on this issue. In this study, participants answered a questionnaire about their ideal society and their attitudes about pro-environmental consumption and status consumption. They also completed a consumer choice task (the results of which have been compiled in a *Concept Database*). One of the elements which varied in the

¹ For more information about provenance, see "Export Opportunities: Provenance"

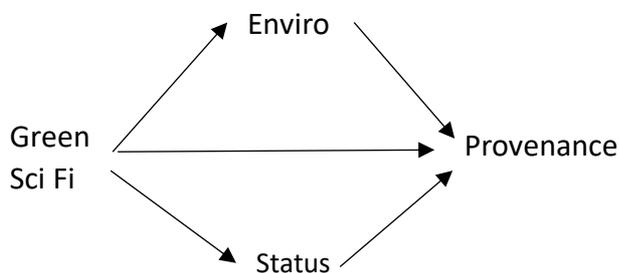
consumer choice task was the provenance information provided about the products. There were six different provenance options, respectively emphasising: 1) modern and clean production, 2) authentic and traceable production, 3) unique source, 4) handcrafting and traditional methods, 5) expert knowledge and 6) limited edition.

Utopian thinking and consumption attitudes

First we wanted to see whether people with different utopian visions would endorse different broad attitudes regarding their consumption behaviours. This was indeed the case as we found that those endorsing a Green utopia were more likely to favour pro-environmental consumption than those endorsing the Sci-Fi utopia. In contrast, people endorsing a Sci-Fi utopia were more likely to be interested in status consumption.

We next wanted to see whether these general attitudes would carry over to decisions about specific products, as measured by the kinds of provenance information people favoured. To do this, we tested whether one's preference for a Sci-Fi or Green utopia was related to each of the six forms of provenance information, and whether this was driven by one's preference for pro-environmental or status consumption attitudes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Model of the effects of utopia theme on provenance preferences



² If you would like to find out more about the Concept Database, please contact Hollis Ashman (hollis.ashman@unimelb.edu.au), Evan Bittner (ebittner@student.unimelb.edu.au), Colette Day (colette.day@unimelb.edu.au). If you would like to find out more about this research in general,

Coffee

We tested this with a range of different products², but as an example, the results for *coffee* were as follows. Preference for **authentic and traceable** production, and **unique source** were both higher among for those with a Green utopia, while **handcrafted and traditional** production was higher among those with a Sci-Fi utopia. Preference for **expert knowledge** in production was lower for those with a Green utopia (and this was driven by pro-environmental consumption attitudes). Finally, there was no effect of utopia on **modern/clean and limited edition** provenance.

Wine

We expected that the effects we observed would likely be affected by the attributes of the specific product, so we conducted the same analysis with wine. Here we found that **modern/clean** and **handcrafted/traditional** were preferred based on a Sci-Fi utopia and status consumption, while preferences for Sci-Fi/status consumption led to *lower* liking of **expert knowledge** provenance. Finally, **limited edition** wines were preferred by those with pro-environmental consumption attitudes.

Clearly, these patterns are different to those that we observed for coffee, but also make a lot of sense. For example, those seeking a Green utopia may be interested in knowing where the coffee came from as an important cue to environmental sustainability. For wine, however, where place of origin information is almost always available, this cue may not be so desirable or salient.

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Some important issues when thinking about utopian thinking and consumption:

- One way for people to make decisions as consumers is to purchase things that they believe will move society closer to their ideal (utopia).
- There are two major prototypes of modern utopian society: the Green and Sci-Fi utopias (but there are likely to be others which may be detected in future research).
- Our data shows that people's utopian visions tend to be expressed in their consumption attitudes and their consumer preferences.
- The effect of utopian thinking is likely to vary depending on the product in question, and the cues it presents regarding environmental sustainability, status etc.
- Understanding the role of consumer activism may be important for producers. For some consumers at least, product or brand preference may be based on concerns for society, and not merely for the self.

Some important questions to ask when thinking about utopian thinking and consumption:

- Does your brand or product have characteristics which may be beneficial to society?
- Are there target groups of consumers who may be especially interested in those characteristics?
- Can these characteristics be easily communicated to consumers?

Some further issues:

The research and theory presented here have largely been developed in a Western cultural context. The Green and Sci-Fi utopias have been established through research in countries like Australia, the United Kingdom and United States. We do not expect that these utopian visions will be perfectly

replicated in other cultures, and early exploratory research is showing this to be the case. We are currently analysing a very similar set of data from China; trying to understand the prominent utopian visions and associations with consumer behaviour. For more information on this research as it develops, please see the contact details cited above.