



“Green Consumerism: the Solution to Our Narcissism?”

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Green Consumerism: the Solution to Our Narcissism?

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I. Introduction

The words “eco-friendly” or “biodegradable” on a product may be very enticing to you, and if it is, it may be because you are a narcissist. Narcissism is selfishness or self-centeredness, and is often seen as a negative characteristic to have. In this day and age, narcissism has taken over in a form it has not before, in a sweep called the “narcissism epidemic.” This epidemic has been defined by the growing emphasis on self-motivation and self-admiration that is favored by American culture. As Jean M Twenge and W Keith Campbell in their novel *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* put it, “...we have taken the desire for self-admiration too far-so far that our culture has blurred the lines of distinction between self-esteem and narcissism in an extreme self-destructive way” (18). Narcissism has become something that used to be just a trait into something that has been grown massively out of proportion. What used to be a trait, has now become imbedded in the culture. The purpose of this essay is to analyze how narcissism works with another problem in our society, the environmental crisis, and to research the question: what is the relationship between narcissism and the environmental crisis?

According to research done by Juneman and Murty Magda Pane in “Apathy Towards Environmental Issues, Narcissism, and Competitive View of the World” and Paul Hoggart in “Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination” apathy is a result of narcissism and in part relates to survivalism, all of which hurt environmentalism greatly. crisis. I also aspire to understand the potential positive of narcissism: green consumerism.

Narcissism as a tool in consumerism can be used to influence "green" behaviors. In a series of studies conducted by Iman Naderi and David Strutton, in the journals “Can Normal Narcissism Be Managed to Promote Green Product Purchases? Investigating a Counterintuitive Proposition,” and “I Support Sustainability But Only When Doing So Reflects Fabulously on Me: Can Green Narcissists Be Cultivated?,” the researchers found a correlation between the

purchasing of environmentally friendly products and narcissism. They found that these "green narcissists" (Naderi and Strutton 387) change the way that we may look at narcissism itself. If green products make one "look good" in society's eyes, then the narcissism behavior that we all engage in, makes these products even more appealing. His ideas are connected to a similar fundamental idea that narcissism can make people buy products if they are seen as unique or special in a narcissists eyes, as explored in Seung Yun Lee and Russell Seidle's "Narcissists as Consumers: The Effects of Perceived on Processing of Product Information." Narcissism is not something that will go away any time soon, however the way it is being suggested to be used here opens a discussion of how we can turn it into positive change.

In discussing narcissism, it is also important to note the moral complexity of narcissism as it works with green consumerism. As Nina Mazar, and Chen-Bo Zhong in "Do Green Products Make Us Better People?" and Johanna Moisaner in "Motivational Complexity of Green Consumerism" explore, green consumerism make us feel good, and this individualistic approach to environmentalism, by reaping these narcissistic tendencies could be the answer to increasing activism. Alex Williams in "Buying into the Green Movement," Bart A. Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe in *Green Consumption: the Global Rise of Eco-Chic*, and the Harvard Business Review article, "The Elusive Green Consumer" all take on this idea of green consumerism as the basis of further political action, and a new community of pro environmentalists. If we can look past the previous definition of narcissism as something "bad" and see it's potential good, then we are able to create a new community of narcissists turned pro-environmentalists, all starting by getting them involved in green consumerism. This net positive is the solution to turning this narcissism epidemic into something greater than an attribute, turning it into something that will demand

action. The relationship between narcissism and environmentalism can be negative, however we are on our way to make it positive.

II. Narcissism and the Environmental Crisis

A. *Narcissism as a Threat and its Repercussions: Competitive World-View, Survivalism, and Ignorance*

Narcissism is a strong contributor to the green problem, not just by promoting survivalism, and apathy, but the inherent characteristic itself making us ignorant. Juneman and Pane conduct a study in which they test the relationship between narcissism and apathy of the environmental crisis. they observe the competitive jungle world-view as they see it to be is fueled by narcissism. They say that, "...chronic admiration on the self and the attitude of 'selfishness' in Darwinian terms made people competitive and lose the capacity to pay attention to the environment" (Juneman and Pane 50). The narcissism epidemic is characterized by the "chronic admiration on the self" (50) that Juneman and Pane observe. This admiration is what has made people competitive, and furthermore it makes them apathetic to the problem. For Juneman and Pane, the root of apathy of the environmental crisis comes from this intense self admiration that we have. However, there are other potential roots for this, such as survivalism, as Hoggett suggests. Hoggett comments on the phenomena of survivalism where the need to cling to one's life has overcome their love of the world. no longer is it about enjoying life as it is, but it is about doing what is necessary to survive. Hoggett observes, "[s]urvivalism is a demoralised state of mind in which questions of value have been progressively destroyed; its radicalism can so quickly take on the authoritarian cloak of lifeboat ethics. But without passion a politics of climate change is disarmed" (Hoggett). Survivalism lacks passion for the Earth, rather it is the clinginess to life. Survivalism has disarmed the politics of climate change as we know it,

demeaning its importance and focusing on what it takes to live day to day rather than what it takes to live a long life. It is survivalism that is the problem, rather than narcissism in this definition. However, it neglects to attract the idea that narcissism is in part, part of survivalism. Survivalism is about life, and clinging to life, the assumption that we serve to live, and it is about “me,me, me.” In survivalism, life surrounds oneself and protecting what we hold nearest to us, all to continue a lifestyle we do not want to change. These aspects of society are irrefutable, and are embedded into our culture as fear and the concept of individualism has taken over and now manages the structure of society. So the question becomes, if these are traits of society, does it mean that we try to get rid of these traits? Or that we should change the way we look at them altogether?

Narcissism is largely identified as being a contributor to the environmental crisis, and the potential outcomes of narcissism make it a threat pro-environmentalism. According to a study by Juneman and Murty Magda Pane, there is a correlation between narcissism and apathy towards the environmental crisis. In this study, the authors noted that apathy at some point roots from narcissism itself. They use the term “competitive jungle worldview” to talk about why the environmental crisis is a problem. According to Juneman and Pane, “[n]ormal narcissism supports asserting interpersonal dominance and fuels achievement motives such as competitive strivings...” (46). In this study, narcissism is correlated to competitiveness. According to a study within this journal, those who scored higher on narcissism personality tests generally were more competitive as well (Juneman, Pane 18). Creating a connection to apathy to this worldview, and stemming that worldview from narcissism implies that there is some sort of connection between apathy and narcissism. When we are more narcissistic, we are generally more competitive, and more apathetic towards more problems. As Campell and Twenge put it before, narcissism has

become self-destructive, and this study only supports that. Narcissism fuels into this competitive jungle world-view where we believe that we must have power or dominance over things, and more so that it is survival of the fittest. This mentality is detrimental because as we become more ambitious to our self admiration and beating one another out, we are risking apathy towards pressing issues. In Paul Hoggett's journal "Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination," narcissism works differently. Narcissism as cited by Hoggett is "...defence against the loss of selfhood: 'Everyday life has begun to pattern itself on the survival strategies forced on those exposed to extreme adversity. Selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, renunciation of the past and the future, a determination to live one day at a time' (p. 57)" (Hoggett). This definition comes from the phenomena from the 1960's where self became a performance rather than genuinity, and the hope to take things day by day overcame the desire to live for a lifetime. It indicates a shift of values from what used to be living in the present, to the will to survive, and maybe even marking the beginning of the narcissism epidemic. Where we began to lose selfhood, we replaced it with narcissism in order to fill the desire for self-admiration. These definitions help us understand multiple reasons as to why narcissism is a cause of apathy, that narcissism incites competitiveness, but even more so it incites fear. The fear of losing what we have has ignited apathy at an all time high and if we continue to neglect these issues, these self-destructive behaviours could cost us more than self-righteousness, but the Earth itself.

III. Green Consumerism

A. Narcissism as a tool?

Iman Naderi suggests narcissism as a tool to fight the apathy caused by narcissism. As a leading frontman in this research and discussion, he explores how narcissism is a widespread

epidemic, and instead of changing narcissism itself, he suggests to entirely restructure it as a solution to change. This idea is structured around another principle concept. Found in a study called “Narcissists as Consumers: The Effects of Perceived Scarcity on Processing of Product Information” and in the discussion before, narcissists are able to buy products when they feel as if they are self serving. As stated in the article, “...narcissistic individuals are motivated to validate their excessively positive self-view by obtaining a scarce product that they perceive as conferring a unique value upon them” (Lee and Seidle 1496). This basic concept that special, exclusive products with a unique value on them, is desirable for narcissists. Using this basic concept, Naderi suggests using this appeal to motivate consumers to buy green products, He says, “...environmentalists should view the perpetual struggle to persuade, cajole, or otherwise emotionally or rationally seduce inherently and deeply self-interested consumers into responding in ways that create more societal good through a more expansive marketing lens” (Naderi and Strutton 387). His studies showed that in order to perpetuate a more pro-environmentalist community, we had to use this untamable characteristic of our society: narcissism. Narcissism is the key to his research, and can be the implication of larger social change. If narcissists are inherently prone to buy products that distinguish them from others, then what is to say that can not also apply to green products?

As mentioned before, Naderi and Strutton have found research and evidence that narcissists are more likely to buy green goods if it is admirable to others and that concept can be a solution to our larger issue. The studies found that “[n]arcissists were significantly more likely than non-narcissists to buy 'green' when the probability of being seen and 'admired' by others was relatively high, as in the case with highly visible green products” (Naderi and Strutton 387). The probability of a narcissist to buy a green product is higher when there is a value associated with it

that can be reaped by a narcissist. Rather than fixing narcissism itself, we should be focusing on how we use it. Narcissism is a bad thing, but it is also an unstoppable thing. It is so deeply ingrained in our society, that is difficult to distinguish from it and the repercussions of it are all the more damaging. So by offering this as a solution rather than a detriment to society, we are enticing social change. As Naderi and Strutton note, we are in a ‘net delusion’ which they say, “...suggests society often tries to solve problems using insights and solutions that worked in the past...” (387). Narcissism is a bad thing and is treated as one, but as these researchers note further in this study, that instead of using methods of the past, it is beneficial to take these attitudes and make it into a movement. Their studies show that narcissists will buy green products if we pull at their self-righteous characteristics, so instead of treating narcissism as a bad thing, it is only in our favor to use these qualities to promote green consumerism. However, even if we see green consumerism as a potential good, it also leads us to evaluate the other possibilities of green consumerism if narcissists turn to it.

B. *Can it work?*

If we accept narcissism as a catalyst for change in the efforts towards environmentalism, then the next step is to evaluate if it works in the larger picture of pro-environmentalism. On the flipside, maybe narcissism is notable to help the crisis, because instead of narcissism being the problem, it is the over consumption of goods that is. Alex William in his article “Buying into the Green Movement” suggests that just because we are buying “green” products, that does not necessarily mean we are “helping” the problem. He points out that what people take issue with, with green consumerism is that it is not contributing to the larger matter at hand. Though buying “green” products can be helpful in that it allows us to feel like we are contributing to the crisis, it

is not what is going to change the tide of environmentalism. Individual consumption, and mass consumption itself contributes to carbon offsets, hurting our environment. If we use our narcissism to take part in something like that it can be harmful to the amount of consumption we contribute. However, as noted in the introduction of *Green Consumption: the Global Rise of Eco-Chic*, “[g]reen consumerism may play a key role as a kind of gateway drug for people who would otherwise be disengaged from any action at all” (Barendregt and Jaffe xvii). Though green consumerism does not tackle the large overall problems of climate change, it can however be the gateway to change and bigger movements. If our narcissism can influence to make individual change, then our individual change can inspire us to make larger change. Williams quotes Michael Shellenberger about the matter, “[t]hey knew what they were doing wasn’t going to deal with the problems, and these little consumer things won’t add up. But they do it as a practice of mindfulness. They didn’t see it as antithetical to political action. Folks who were engaged in these green practices were actually becoming more committed to more transformative political action on global warming” (Williams 2007). Just because consumerism is negative, and feeds on our moral pridefulness and strength, it does not mean that it can grow into something else. As Shellenberger points out, green consumerism shows mindfulness, and this mindfulness can lead to larger political action. If our narcissism fuels off our morals, and it leads to mindful consumerism, then why can it not grow to a larger movement?

We have seen that narcissism and morality are clear players in green consumerism, but more than that it can become a catalyst for change of industries and political activism even though green consumerism is inherently individualistic. As said in “Do Green Products make us Better People?” “[i]n line with the halo associated with green consumerism, results showed that people act more altruistically after mere exposure to green products than after mere exposure to

conventional products” (Mazar and Zhong). This study showed that green consumerism is proven to increase when buying green products is associated with being morally superior and by the mere exposure to it. If we know this as a basis then we can acknowledge that simple changes can push us to buy products that are more helpful than harmful towards the environment, then the greater good outweighs the potential harm. Though it can be argued that buying these products can make one less likely to continue environmental action, as reviewed in a Harvard Business Review article, the term “licensing” which is used by researchers is when a consumer feels less inclined to take action because they feel as if their initial action is sufficient. However this “licensing” effect can be depleted if more businesses become sustainable, and market their goods as a greater good. All in all, though consumerism is individualistic and is a small part of a larger picture, it offers a beginning. As stated in the Harvard Business Review by Katherine White, David J. Hardisty, and Rishad Habib, “[u]sing marketing fundamentals to connect consumers with a brand’s purpose, showing benefits over and above conventional options, and making sustainability irresistible are central challenges for businesses in the coming decades. As more and more succeed, sustainable business will become smart business” (White). In other words, if the brand proves and advertises to consumers the advantages of green products over conventional products, we will be forced to choose the sustainable option because of its irresistible appeal. Though small, if businesses work towards these changes, it creates a new industry of sustainable business and industries. Green consumerism means businesses have to cater to demand, and therefore changes the structure and principles of it entirely, and if we use narcissism as a catalyst, it provides this greater good.

More so than creating large business, it creates the basis of what could be political development. Narcissism is a negative thing, but as seen through this essay, narcissism can be

made into a 'positive,' and this positive outweighs the potential negative. Though it is true that individualism and green consumerism is the best way to fix environmentalism, it finds the roots of it, and even more than that it creates a community. This community can become the foundation of political activism. Johanna Moisanders in her journal "Motivational complexity of green consumerism" explores the potential factors that influence green consumerism and evaluates its usefulness in society. She joins other scholars in that she believes that the lack of individualistic approach in environmentalism must be problematized. Moisanders says, "[s]ustainable development is ultimately a moral and political question and would seem to require that the lone green consumer joins other green consumers and takes collective action as a political citizen. Therefore, there is a need to create opportunities for co-operation and collective action at the grass roots level" (408). Becoming a green consumer sets the stage for political action, therefore as a bigger whole, advocating for green consumerism through the use of narcissism is setting the stage at "the grass roots level" (Moisanders 408). More so than that, it is also a call to action. Being part of a community of green consumerists influences those of the community to keep going, and to gain recognition and responsibility for our actions. Being a green consumer forces responsibility and change. As Moisanders states, "[o]ften they are also expected to influence their peers and be active in civic organizations, raising people's eco-awareness, collecting names for petitions and writing letters and emails to politicians, demanding that governments and firms take responsibility" (408). This clearly illustrates how we can use individualism and these new communities as a greater good. Naderi and Strutton make a similar observation when they say, "...it provides insights on how to convert an already widespread and rising threat within our society (culture of narcissism) and its potential undesirable consequences (short-term, self-directed, unsustainable behavior) into opportunities with net positive outcomes

for the society (pro-environmental behavior)” (Naderi and Strutton). Though it could be argued that consumerism is a small part of activism, it is a trigger that can do more than that, it can excite pro-environmentalism and is more essential to the problem than green consumerism in itself. That being so, narcissism as a means to promote green consumerism is a way to promote social activism, and if this ‘negative’ can make net positives, then this potential good outweighs the alternative culture of narcissism.

IV. Conclusion

Narcissism in its past has always been known as a negative attribute, but with these findings, we can see how we can turn narcissism from being detrimental to beneficial. Narcissism is known as causing apathy and survivalistic tendencies, and can promote ignorance when referring to the environmental crisis, and though it is undeniably true that it is hurting the potential for change, the way we are looking at it now will not help us solve it. Narcissism is ingrained in our society and that can not be changed but the way we are using it can be. Narcissism is more than an attribute, it is a set of behaviours that can be utilized by society to promote green consumerism, which is the basis of other political action. Narcissism can be the catalyst of change if we make it one, and as the research shows, it is possible. We are more influenced to buy green products when they are attributed to unique qualities, and if we utilize this, then we are able to grow an industry and community of green consumerism. Though there is a potential adverse effect of people thinking that buying green products is sufficient enough, the greater good outweighs the minor risk. The potential it holds is more influential than that, and even more so even if just our spending habits change, it changes the way businesses look at their potential audience. As previously mentioned, consumerism is a small part of a larger whole, but it holds power in that it builds communities and businesses that are innovative and change to the

pro-environmentalist agenda. This means by pulling at our narcissistic attributes we are able to make a community and industry that could potentially change the political status of environmentalism. If consumers begin to change their ways, businesses will be forced to follow, and as business changes, so does politics. If businesses and consumers change the way that they look at consumerism, politicians will have to start responding to it by making bills and laws to support the growing community. Right now, the narcissistic epidemic has made it so that we are self-absorbed and unaware of these potentials, but as we change the way we solve narcissism, we are capable of growing a large movement and community of pro-environmentalists capable of changing not only industry and consumer habits, but also the political climate and state of the environmentalism crisis itself. We could make it so people are more aware of the problem, and so there is work being done towards it, if only we utilize that self-centeredness and use it to bring about change. So maybe, being a narcissist is not so bad after all.

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