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### **Banal Environmentalism: Defining and Exploring an Expanded Understanding of Ecological Identity, Awareness, and Action**

**Ryan Cunningham,**  
MSc in Global Media and Communication

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# **Banal Environmentalism: Defining and Exploring an Expanded Understanding of Ecological Identity, Awareness, and Action**

**Ryan Cunningham**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an effort to move beyond antiquated models of environmental agency based on overt political protest and other forms of morally-motivated activism. I will argue that a more productive and relevant framework can be found in the notion of 'banal environmentalism,' a project identity founded on everyday consumptive experience in which dimensions of citizenship, consumerism, practice, and political engagement are intimately tied to mediation but share complex and often inconsistent relationships with one another. I will then describe an empirical investigation designed to explore relationships between these distinct dimensions of the banal environmentalism hypothesis in the context of energy efficiency, as encountered and experienced by individuals active in particularistic public spheres online. I will discuss the support this data provides for the hypothesis, and outline the resulting challenges and paradoxes posed to both ongoing critical media scholarship as well as the burgeoning green marketplace.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper is founded on the suspicion that models of environmental agency based on overt activism and political protest are increasingly antiquated and inadequate frameworks for understanding the nature and implications of current ecologically-aware actions and attitudes. Attempting to categorize contemporary actors into the roles of the activist or the 'deliberative democrat' (Young, 2001) leaves an increasing amount to be desired; the Gramscian model of conflict between hegemonic powers and counter-hegemonic movements, played out in a world of political action and public policy discourse, is now both an incomplete frame for understanding modern environmental communication and an insufficient architecture for addressing current ecological problems. Contemporary environmentalism operates in a far more complex dynamic.

A key complicating factor of interest to this paper is the rapidly-expanding consumer marketplace for 'eco-conscious' goods and services, which has risen to prominence on the wings of proliferating environmentalist discourse but maintains a multilayered and often tense relationship with it. The boundaries of this market are wide, flexible, and undoubtedly expanding, comprising everything from organic tomatoes to yoga classes to hybrid cars. As these products mainstream and their sectors expand, the entrepreneurs on the frontiers confirm that the rhetoric is following suit—shifting from classic moral appeals of altruism and ecological empowerment to more conventional consumer concerns. These goods will save you money; they'll make you look cool; they can even, in the case of 'eco-friendly' sex toys peddled by companies such as Coco de Mer and Lelo, get you ahead in the bedroom. The argument that they'll save the planet is an important but increasingly secondary message that alone is seen as an insufficient driver of the bottom line.

However, a forced dichotomy between ethically motivated citizenship and self-interested consumerism leaves much to be desired. Viewing citizens as informed outward-thinking altruists and consumers as myopic self-absorbed isolationists is also an antiquated perspective—it is no longer possible to "cut the deck neatly" between the two extremes (Scammell, 2000: 352). Indeed, the rise of the green marketplace introduces a myriad of unresolved and under-studied tensions into the bipolar picture of political protest. How does one distinguish between effective tools of change and "greenwashed" products leeching exploitatively on the under-informed but well-meaning consumer? What are the moral implications of a consumer culture adopting ostensibly environmentally-friendly habits which

are not motivated or supported by genuinely environmentally-aware commitments? Is there a market-based solution to ecological degradation? If so, what role will individuals play in it, and what are the barriers to its success?

This paper is, at its core, an exploratory investigation of these tensions from the perspective of the citizen-consumer. I will begin by drawing on diverse bodies of literature—including risk society, identity politics, and the notion of mediated public connection—to synthesize an alternative hypothesis connecting political agency, consumption, citizenship and consumerism in the lives of ordinary individuals. Specifically, I will offer the notion of a ‘banal environmentalism’—an environmentally ethical self-concept that is fundamentally consumed via products both mediated and material. I will argue that these acts of consumption, while not overt incarnations of protest, are nevertheless political in a manner unanticipated and underappreciated by both traditional notions of environmental communication and emergent assumptions of the ‘green’ marketplace.

I will then review and analyze an empirical investigation designed to probe the contours of the banal environmentalism hypothesis, exploring the dynamic inter-relationships of its dimensions. The Mediated Efficiency Survey drew on active online media users in a variety of specific interest contexts and probed for connections to both media and materialism in another realm—energy efficiency. It measured media connection (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007) in particularistic and energy-related contexts, narrative statements of citizenship and consumerism, and active engagement in both traditionally-political civic issues as well as identity-driven consumption decisions. Ultimately, the paper will describe several ways in which the survey data is consistent with the assumptions of banal environmentalism, and will raise several unique challenges which these assumptions pose both to the emerging ‘green’ industries and future evolutions of related scholarship.

## **2. THEORETHICAL FOUNDATIONS**

The core goal of the theoretical exploration contained in this section is to build a new understanding of the environmentally-ethical actions and intentions observed in individuals which can be operationalized into productive research. This will be accomplished via four key steps. First, I will disassociate perceived ecological risk from an objective conception of the natural world, exposing the mediated and contextual nature of environmental dangers. I will then broadly review several key insights from the field of identity politics to outline a framework for understanding the role of the individual in responding to these mediated dangers. I will also acknowledge the assumptions and intentions of a growing consumer marketplace of goods and services seeking to capitalize on these individual responses. I will then move toward an actionable research agenda by borrowing from the concept of 'mediated public connection' to contextualize the roles of citizenship and consumerism. Ultimately, I will synthesize from these explorations a new concept of 'banal environmentalism,' summarizing its components and operationalizing its research implications.

### **MORAL MISSIONS IN THE RISK CONTEXT**

Ulrich Beck's theory of world risk society (1992; 1995; 1999; 2002) envisions a late industrial age ensnared in a paradox of technocratically-managed abstract risks. Beck argues that the negative externalities of accelerated industrialization and globalization have amounted to a myriad of dangers spanning environmental ruin, financial crisis, and terrorist violence—risks which are fundamentally different from the threats of earlier ages not because there are more of them, but because they are 'de-bounded' in space, time, and social relationships (2002: 41). In other words, the definitive challenges of modernity are no longer posed by one nation upon another, or a by a specific polluting factory on a distinctly adjacent community. The rhetoric of risk has evolved—in everything from global terror to global warming—into an abstract condition that can affect anyone, anywhere, at any time.

To Beck, this scenario cripples any form of agency both individual and aggregate: people can no longer choose (e.g., by moving to a different geographical area) the extent to which they subject themselves to risk; governments can implement policy and subsidize technology only to reduce and constrain risk, but can never entirely abolish it. Risk is thus limited as much as possible, after which the remainder is socially accepted and normalized—

an institutionalization of risk itself in which the limits of acceptability are perpetually dynamic and inevitably escalating. "Our lives continue ever more normally, ever more hazardously" through the creation of institutions, legal regimes, and cultural norms all predicated on addressing abstract threats, until society actually comes to *depend* upon the condition of being threatened (Beck, 1995: 13, 49-51).

This counterintuitive condition of increasingly accepted risk poses interesting implications for the analysis of environmentalist protest movements. Beck (1995) follows the position that 'nature' itself is a mediated social construction that is anything but natural in urban modernity (e.g. Derrier, 1999; Castree & Braum, 2002), and indeed operates as an antithetical foil to the psycho-social frustrations of that system. He then suggests that environmental activism aiming to defend this falsely normative 'nature' is in fact a subjective struggle against a threatened middle-class conception of nature as an escape from the bureaucratic and corporate forces of advanced industrial society (Beck, 1995: 53-54). Environmental activism is, in this view, essentially an externalization of inner social unrest.

Despite its shortcomings and theatrics, this argument offers several useful insights for the research agenda at hand. It liberates an analysis of environmentally-conscious actions and rhetoric from the confines of frameworks based on morally-motivated political activism. In doing so, it exposes the mediated subjectivity of both nature and of the risks posed to it, focusing on the power dynamics that underlie the construction and discourse of "publicity-dependent hazards" (Beck, 1995: 110). It suggests that such power dynamics are at play not only between social groups but also within the complex mechanics of personal identity construction—that individual actions and orientations toward environmental issues are in fact mediated by "cultural symbols and experiences" regardless of the often technocratic rhetoric of activists (Beck, 1995: 47). Finally, Beck's (1995) argument accomplishes all of these framing foundations without discrediting the fundamental premise that the world's ecological resources are indeed at risk and that human action could and should work to mitigate those conditions. To be clear: invoking the risk society argument is not an attempt to stir up outdated debates by claiming that global warming is a farce, nor is it an effort to discredit or dismiss the activists on the other side of such contentions. It is an invitation to engage more critically and reflexively with the socially-constructed and inevitably-mediated nature of environmental communication and action, especially as it plays out in and through the lives of individuals.

It is this focus on the role of individuals that leads Beck, in later work, to define and advocate a cosmopolitan solution to the abstraction of risk (Beck, 2002b, 2006). This position places faith in self-reflexive individuals who are able to transcend the institutionalization of hazards; to reach across artificial and increasingly irrelevant boundary constructions such as national identity and the supremacy of science; to act politically and personally in the interests of both themselves and others. However, Beck ultimately fails to sufficiently address the complexities of positive actions made by individuals in the service of environmental conservation, particularly those decisions not entirely driven by an overt cosmopolitan consciousness (Ignatow, 2007). In the contemporary context of a flourishing market for 'eco-friendly' goods and services and an emerging fashion of individual behavior-changes (Grant, 2007), this proactive field of non-activist action poses an intriguing challenge to the frameworks of risk society and cosmopolitanism. The research agenda at hand seeks to evolve Beck's analysis of overt political struggle to include the identity politics driving individuals' environmentally ethical purchase and practice decisions.

## **MULTILAYERED NOTIONS OF SELF AND SELF-INTEREST**

Scholarship in the field of post-modern and post-structural identity politics is diverse, nuanced, and often internally contentious. This paper has neither the space nor intention to adequately engage the broader field. Rather, the aim of this section is to briefly draw out and summarize three widely-influential insights relevant to an understanding of individuals' environmentally ethical identity construction.

The first is the recognition that individual identities are active projects fueled by multiple, fluid and dynamic narratives that are often forged from opposition. Hall (1990: 225, 1996) describes identities as a production never complete, constantly evolving as individuals position themselves within and against cultural narratives. Thompson (1995) emphasizes the extent to which this production is driven by the contexts and resources available to individuals, which have been exponentially expanded through modern mediation. Castells (2004: 68-9) argues that 'communal resistance' drives the majority of these modern identities (2004: 11), and understands the 'cacophony' of disparate environmental movements (170-9) as all sharing this combative element. Ignatow (2007) encourages an even broader view, insisting that identities projected in response to ecological threats need not only forge the cosmopolitan individualism of Beck's (2002b, 2006) aspirations nor the outwardly oppositional resistances of Castells' (2004) typologies, but can in fact lead to an



even more diverse and in many ways more subtle array of sub- and trans-national identity groupings.

The second relevant insight is the observation that identity is constantly mediated; that in a globalized modernity which blurs the boundaries of time and space through digital communication technology, individuals increasingly encounter each other and the world around them entirely within a 'mediated space of appearance' (Silverstone, 2006). Silverstone's influential understanding of the mediated environment places these interactions as equally important to—and indeed intimately intertwined with—interaction in the natural environment (2006: 166). This perspective reinforces the importance of studying and understanding individuals' experiences with and reactions to media as formative to their self-concepts and thus decisions. It also justifies media as a productive—possibly the most productive—site in which to study individuals' identities and orientations in relation to the natural environment. Most important, however, it emphasizes the extent to which identity must be understood not only in terms of real-world action and intent, but in the narrative content individuals project within their mediated environments. Thompson (1995) writes about this fissure between mediated and lived experience, insisting that identities are no longer dependent on physical proximities but rather the 'despatialized commonalities' which bind emergent communities.

This becomes intimately relevant to the third insight of identity politics: that individual identity is, by virtue of its dependence on mediation, a matter of consumption; and thus communal identity is inevitably a matter of co-consumption. This perspective is rooted in scholarship around Anderson's (1983) classic concept of 'imagined communities'—defined, felt, and expressed through the use of common media and the everyday or 'banal' consumptive activities used by individuals to 'flag' themselves as belonging to a particular national, global, or cosmopolitan group (c.f. Billig, 1995; Szerszynski & Urry, 2002; Beck, 2002b, 2006: 85-91). To return to Ignatow, ecological identities can in this sense be best understood as a framework of trans- and sub-national consumption habits which make up the everyday lives and identities of individuals (2007: 34-5). Identity is thus symbiotically tied to consumption; both defined and expressed by what is available to consume, and profoundly influential on the contours of the consumer marketplace. Hobson (2006) effectively summarizes the inter-relationship between all three of the above insights in his assertion that "the governing of consumption and the governing of the consuming self are

not separate but highly mediated and contingent processes,” in which “ethical consumption is placed in its context of everyday expression” (296).

Ultimately, this holistic understanding of environmentally ethical identity as intimately tied to consumption, inevitably mediated, and just one part of a broader and more complex identity project moves beyond several other previous frameworks held by social scientists and industry analysts alike. It downplays a view of sustainable consumption decisions as rational cost-benefit calculations (e.g. Nordlund & Garvill, 2002; Lindén and Klintman, 2003), and thus calls into question initiatives such as eco-labeling programs that focus solely on the provision of rational information (e.g. Thøgersen 1996, 2005; Biel, 2003; Russell, Krarup and Clark, 2005). Similarly, it disassociates environmentally-ethical behavior from the assumption of absolute, pre-determined ‘green values’ (e.g. Stern & Dietz, 1994) and encourages a research agenda that views such motivations as contextual and multilayered. It also transcends the simplistic and linear conception of ‘behavior change’ literature offered by environmental psychologists whose models tend to assume a constant individual and seek to understand that person’s rational responses to discrete pieces of information (Hobson, 2006: 292; citing Blake, 1999: 264). Before building a more productive research agenda on these new principles, however, it is worth considering the perspective of ‘green’ marketers through the lens of project identity.

## **BUSINESS MODELS IN THE CONSUMER CONTEXT**

Scholarship and industry-led discourse around this burgeoning green marketplace seems, at first glance, an unlikely partner to the nuanced social theory of risk society and identity politics. The idea of ecological threats as socially constructed and institutionally exacerbated couldn’t be more foreign. To John Grant (2007), a veteran marketer who has penned the self-proclaimed ‘manifesto’ of green marketing, global warming remains a looming threat not because advanced capitalist society depends upon it but because a laggard business community has yet to fully embrace its integrated profit potential. Grant’s (2007) perspective is significant here in the extent to which it represents a glimpse of current and future values at the helm of consumption-driven popular culture. He assumes that consumers not only have agency, but also have an underlying will to act on it in ethical ways—if and when they perceive marketers as offering realistic opportunities to do so (Grant, 2007: 39). To Grant (2007), activating this agency is a matter of both product and packaging. The “fear-fueled fatalism” (31) of classic environmentalist discourse is a turnoff

to individuals; efforts to 'greenwash' normal products with eco-friendly attributes are equally counterproductive. The more desirable (as well as profitable and ethical) way forward lies in making products that are "great first and green second" (6); to lift them out of a constraining niche and reposition a green lifestyles as "normal rather than exceptional" (41).

Essentially, whereas Beck's (1995) risk society is predicated on the agency-deprived rationalization of abstract world hazards, Grant's (2007) solution is a project of wholesale acculturation built on the normalization of specific products and practices, trusting in the that individual consumers are ready and willing to participate. This sentiment resonated strongly with members of the green business community who I interviewed during formative work for this project. Adam Vaughan, editor of eco-product review website SmartPlanet.com, characterizes his most promising readers as 'light green,' defined as either 'positive choosers' or the 'conveniently conscious' individuals who he believes comprise two-thirds of the U.K. population (personal communication, 13 June 2008). Rob Moore, manager of the Together.com initiative to encourage major companies to develop and promote green products, reinforced the "I will if you will" perception of consumer attitudes toward corporate policy change and the increasing resonance of programs which benefit both shoppers' and sellers' bottom lines (interview 13 June 2008). Greta Corke, entrepreneur and co-founder of a company producing a high-design home electricity meter, shunned the idea of limiting her product to a green niche, preferring a strategy of "introducing it into everyday life, like a lifestyle object" (interview 26 June 2008; see Appendix H).

This optimistic faith in consumer capacity—regardless of its actual empirical validity—indeed promises to be increasingly influential in future 'green' business models and resulting currents of popular culture. And yet, as the above insights of identity politics suggest, it is limited by an oversimplified conception of individuals and often dangerously reductionist approach to ecological dangers (Smith, 1998). In the words of Russell, Krarup and Clark (2005), scholarship must focus on "the public as well as private dimensions of ... individual (marginal) transactions," taking a "step outside the classic microeconomic model" to understand individuals' ethical behavior (15).

## **CITIZENS, CONSUMERS, AND MEDIATED PUBLIC CONNECTION**

At the core of this paper's argument is the idea that such a "step outside" classic models involves fundamentally redrawing our understanding and methods of studying environmental agency. Moving toward a new framework for empirical analysis, a critical piece of theoretical synthesis is in order. If, as argued above, an environmentally-ethical project self is increasingly dependent on consumption of both commodities and media; and if we follow Beck's (1995) argument that individual actions made in the name of ecological concern are expressive of underlying power dynamics and thus always political in often-unintentional dimensions; we must then accept the transitive conclusion that purchase decisions are not only personally definitive, but also inherently public and political. However ironically, environmental citizenship is unavoidably an issue of consumption. Viewed in reverse, everyday ethical consumption decisions—no matter how mundane—are inherently political in aggregate.

Though approached via new routes, this is by no means a novel argument. Scammell's (2000) prescient assertion of the increasing inseparability of citizenship and consumerism referenced in the introduction was founded on the observation that, while developed-world individuals' agency as citizens is waning, their power as consumers is expanding exponentially—due primarily to the range of choice offered by the Internet. Scammell confirms that this political expression of empowered consumerism is by no means limited to an activist minority but is rather "the day-to-day activity of increasing millions of ordinary folk whose regular conduct of leisure and consumption has an ever-stronger political edge" (2000: 352). Stevenson (2002) goes further, arguing that ecological movements must equally embrace information-society interconnection and consumer-society self-interest by finding a place for consumption within the realm of cosmopolitan action—to "connect questions of ethics to those of pleasure" in building a global dialogue among an environmentally-interested citizenry (310).

Viewing environmental consumption as a form of political agency offers a direct alternative to the pessimistic 'media malaise' thesis (Norris, 2000) offered by the likes of Zygmunt Bauman (1998; 2007) and Robert Putnam (2000), who bemoan the decline of civil society institutions and erosion of traditional political engagement paradigms at the hands of an increasingly selfish and media-dependent society. At the same time, this expansion of the realm of civic engagement also poses a challenge to models of deliberative democracy,

including the Habermassian notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992) in which informed citizens approach common problems through open dialogue—a theory largely confined to a traditional political realm defined by politicians, legislation, and policies.

More recent evolutions of Habermassian thought, yielding to criticisms of the public sphere's unrealistic assumptions when conceived en masse (e.g. Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1992), have advanced the idea of several 'micro' or discrete 'public sphericules' (e.g. Dahlgren, 1995; Gitlin, 1998; Squires, 2002). These theories explore the operation of multiple public spheres conceived within specific sub-groups of ethnicity or interest brought together by 'particularistic' topic- and audience-focused media (Dayan, 1998). Though this scholarship is founded primarily on analysis of oppressed ethnic minorities, I argue that the micro public sphere framework can be viewed as an evolution of the co-consumptive communities of mediated identity and banal expression discussed above, wherein individuals not only project their own identities but actively interact with one another in a Silverstonian space of mediated appearance.

Couldry, Livingstone and Markham's (2006; 2007) recent work on mediated public connection is an important exploration of the relationship between these consumption-dependent micro public spheres and an expanded notion of civic engagement (see also formative work including Couldry, 2004 and Couldry & Langer, 2005). Setting out to "look in unconventional places" for the connections between citizenship and consumerism (Couldry, 2004: 22), this research agenda redefines 'public connection' in an attempt to transcend the constraints of institutionalized civic engagement in favor of a more complex 'cultural citizenship' model. This paradigm is built on Dahlgren's (2003) six-part 'dynamic circuit' of individual values, affinities, knowledge, practices, identities, and discussion—a constructionist approach to the civic orientations of individuals which locates media at the core of both "declining engagement in traditional electoral politics" as well as a "newer, informal politics" of consumption and culture (168).

Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007: 89) define and measure 'strong' and 'weak' dimensions of 'public connection' and 'media connection' separately, while also looking to the scale of social interaction which individuals exhibit. In line with the poststructuralist epistemology of project self outlined above, this research framework accounts for complex and even contradictory combinations of media and public connection in multiple dimensions and, rather than attempting rigid typologies, seeks moments of overlap across multiple

dimensions. Mediated public connection, they conclude, is “more likely to occur when peoples’ disparate activities (as social being, audience member, and public actor) *intersect* in at least one common domain, whether it is local, national, or, rarely, global” (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007: 129; emphasis in original).

Many elements of this research and its design are foundational to my own study described below. Critically, the project’s strategy of stratifying and measuring media consumption by multiple dimensions of quality—including measures of centrality/dispensability, directed use, and attraction (98-103)—was influential in my own methodology, as was the insight of clustering respondents based on the themes of media which dominated their interests (170-1) and the underlying value of relying on respondents themselves to help quantify and express both of the above measures (181).

## **REVIEW AND SYNTHESIS**

The framework outlined above extends an understanding of individuals’ interactions with environmental identity and agency in several dimensions. Via Beck’s risk society thesis, it understands individual actions and values in defense of nature to be contextual, subjective and often self-interested. Through postmodern identity politics, it emphasizes the extent to which these actions and values are anything but rational—they are intertwined with other identities, inevitably mediated, and intimately tied to consumption decisions. Finally, via models of consumer-citizenship and mediated public connection, it links this mediation and consumption directly to citizenship, challenging traditional understandings of political engagement and public action. Ultimately, these expansions amount to a call for a revitalized research agenda within the study of environmental values and behaviors—an agenda that moves beyond traditionally political and polarized entrenchments of activism and protest to consider more complex decisions of consumption and mediation.

I suggest that we draw on the long-discussed notions of ‘banal’ identities referenced above to refer to this new framework as ‘banal environmentalism.’ This moniker speaks to the dynamics of individual project identities, the imagined communities forged when those identities are constituted and communicated through everyday consumptive patterns, and the political implications of such aggregated actions. In other words, it assumes that individuals both construct environmentally-ethical identities and exert related civic agency via consumption more than conviction, and it expects all of those elements—identities, actions,

values, and desires—to not only fluctuate but to do so independently of one another. Finally, it emphasizes the extent to which each of these processes are intimately influenced by mediation and indeed often take place predominately within a mediated environment.

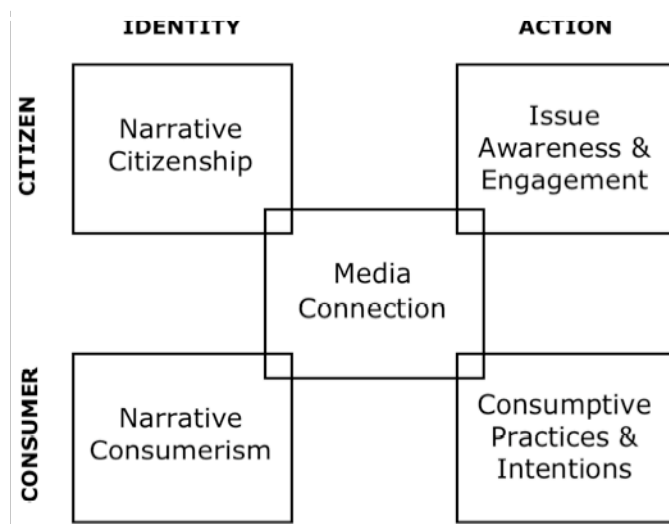
Banal environmentalism is, as outlined here, a hypothesis derived from theoretical insights that have been built and defended in a range of different contexts, few of which are immediately relevant to ecological awareness. In both its re-contextualization of social theory and its re-framing of environmental action, it raises far more questions than answers. The remainder of the paper describes an initial empirical investigation designed to probe the dynamics of the banal environmentalism hypothesis; the following section brings focus to the key research questions driving that investigation.

### 3. FRAMING THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

#### OPERATIONALIZING BANAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

Figure 1 expresses a simplified visualization of the dimensions of banal environmentalism and their possible relationships, articulated in the form of five observable elements that will become crucial to the empirical investigation which unfolds below: narrative citizenship, narrative consumerism, issue awareness and engagement, consumptive practices and intentions, and, crucially, media connection. As discussed above, it is expected that each of these elements share an intimate relationship with media but are likely to

**Figure 1:** Measurable Dimensions of Banal Environmentalism



experience inconsistent, distorted, or even non-existent relationships with each other. A first task for the banal environmentalism research agenda is to investigate these associations; the following study attempts to do so within the focused context of energy efficiency. The research framework sketched here makes two critical assumptions in this pursuit: that the dimensions of banal environmentalism are measurable via the proxies of individuals' self-reported narratives

and behaviors, and that such measurement will allow for a productive analysis of the complex inter-relationships between them.

#### FOCUSING THE RESEARCH: ENERGY EFFICIENCY AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The study was designed around issues of energy use and efficiency in an effort to focus the research onto a realm of specific environmental actions, behaviors, and consumption patterns. This particular area was chosen over others (such as biodiversity protection, organically-sourced produce, pollution control, or global warming awareness) for several important factors. Energy issues operate politically in both traditional and consumptive contexts: policy debates and activists' protests are salient public issues, and at



the same time consumer lifestyle options, such as hybrid vehicles or 'clean energy' tariffs, are readily available on the US and European markets with a wide and increasing level of awareness. The spectrum of these products ranges from low-investment goods, such as compact fluorescent light bulbs or solar-powered alarm clocks, to high-investment lifestyle-changing products such as all-electric vehicles and solar panel installations. Also, crucially, many of these goods present a dual value proposition—offering both an environmentally ethical appeal and a meaningful fiscal incentive simultaneously. As such, energy issues and products are available to and considered by a wide-ranging audience in the mediascape.

This diversity of audience was a critical factor in enabling participant recruitment from a broad base of topic-oriented online discussion forums. These particularistic sites of digital interaction, often constitutive of micro public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005), offer several advantages in light of the theoretical framework advanced above. As pointed out by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007) individuals can be productively clustered by their self-defined interests. Volunteer research subjects are inevitably self-selected; recruiting from communities of already-active media consumers allowed for the embrace rather than evasion of this type of participant bias. In effect, the study was designed to reach 'media connectors' in a variety of particularistic environments and explore cross-contextual links to an expanded notion of consumptive public connection in the distinct realm of energy efficiency.

## **TOWARD A CORE RESEARCH QUESTION**

These constructive limitations to the research context help narrow the field of questions posed by the banal environmentalism hypothesis. Ultimately, the guiding research question becomes a matter of dimensions. How do media connectors active in different particularistic public spheres encounter and express—both in narratives and in actions— notions of citizenship and consumerism in the context of energy efficiency? Consistent with the multidimensional framework of banal environmentalism, the "how" in this question leaves open many distinct avenues to explore—including an analysis of the relative extent to which citizenship and consumerism narratives are constructed, connections to self-reported behavior and statements of intent, correlation to media consumption both within the original topic of interest and relative to energy efficiency, and variance across demographic measures of age, gender, income, and education.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### **SURVEY STRATEGY AND DESIGN**

The choice of a quantitative research method allowed for the numeric and dispassionate exploration, both on the part of the participant and the analyst, of the inherently qualitative and complex dimensions of banal environmentalism. Such a strategy may seem counterintuitive at first glance, especially given the methodological primacy currently enjoyed by semi-structured interviewing in critical media research (e.g. Bauer & Gaskell, 2000: 44; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003: 36-7). Indeed, the project was originally designed as a series of ethnographic interviews similar to those completed by Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham's (2007) mediated public connection project. After two pilot interviews, however, it became clear that the level of self-reflexivity demanded by a research agenda wishing to pull apart overlapping identity projects and the intertwined dimensions of citizenship and consumerism within them was far too much to expect from a single interview encounter or even more intensive methods beyond the resources available to this project. Furthermore, recruiting a sufficient number of online media connectors to participate in offline, in-situ interviews proved an insurmountable challenge from several angles—inviting myself into individuals' homes with neither prior introduction nor funds to offer an incentive was a tall order, and the deterritorialized nature of the internet made it difficult to find web-based discussion communities with a high concentration of potential subjects based in London in the first place.

The online survey offered a solution to all of these challenges as well as several other distinct advantages. Rather than ask individuals to respond in their own words to difficult and unfamiliar concepts, my primary strategy shifted to allowing respondents to orient themselves around a series of pre-formed statements, practices, and issues carefully chosen as proxy measurements of the distinct dimensions of banal environmentalism. Conducting this investigation in an online environment was also a far more natural method of participation for respondents—they could complete the survey on their own time, in their own homes, within the context of online interaction with which they were already comfortable. This proximity offered a distinct advantage when asking respondents to react self-reflexively to provocative statements, and greatly expanded the breadth of subjects from which data could be collected (Nesbary, 2000; Tourangeau, 2000), allowing for qualitative

interpretations about the dimensions of banal environmentalism that are also quantitatively reliable.

The survey was constructed and presented in four sections. The first comprised a series of questions about the website or discussion community on which the respondent encountered the survey—a tactic to establish familiarity and to gauge the level of media connection within the particularistic public sphere from which respondents were recruited. The final section contained a list of simple demographic questions to be used as control measures. The core data of interest was collected in the middle sections.

The second survey section addressed the four key dimensions of banal environmentalism. A series of provocative agree-disagree statements designed to express representative aspects of narrative citizenship and consumerism were presented in random order. Responses were coded on a standard ordinal scale ranging from “strongly disagree” (-2) to “strongly agree” (2), a strategy that allowed mean aggregate variables to be calculated for both citizenship and consumerism from individual question responses. Appendix C summarizes the specific statements used to assemble these aggregate measures. Similar lists of products and practices representative of consumptive action, as well as current events and issues designed to gauge traditional civic engagement, were used to compile mean aggregate scores of each of those action-engagement dimensions (also summarized in Appendix C). Unlike the narrative statements, however, these action-engagement measures were not presented in an agree-disagree fashion. Given the great deal of contextual variance inherent in opinion and practice decisions, I was more interested in the overall extent to which respondents considered themselves to be aware of and engaged in energy-related issues and practices than the specific content of their opinions on these items. For example, the ordinally-coded response options for each issue item ranged from “I’m not entirely sure what you mean” (1) to “I have an opinion on this and discuss it” (4).

It is important to clarify here that the coding and calculation of mean aggregate dimensions of narrative and active citizenship and consumerism is in no way intended to imply an absolute or numerically-quantifiable banal environmentalism. This study is designed to explore, not to preemptively assume, the dynamics of these complex project identities; such simplistic conclusions would be counterproductive and inconsistent with the framework of identity politics on which this understanding is built. The numeric coding and analysis tactics employed herein, rather, are an attempt to uncover statistically significant insights

about the nature and extent of *relative* correlations and associations between distinct dimensions in the energy-related decisions of individuals. The survey methodology in this context is thus very much a quantitative means to a qualitative end.

The third section of the survey was designed to measure the final component of interest to the banal environmentalism model in this context—connections to energy-related media connection. The approach, discussed here as a “media mapping” exercise, asked respondents to identify specific examples, in their own words, of media they had recently encountered which had some relevance to energy. To encourage and organize these responses, the question was repeated within different media format categories—‘Internet,’ ‘Broadcast,’ ‘Print,’ and ‘Other.’ Respondents were then asked to rate (“map”) both the intentionality with which they pursued that media item and the credibility and of the content. A third ordinal variable was then coded based on my own analysis of the text of each open-ended response, measuring actual relevance to energy efficiency. This rating comprised a three-point ordinal scale of relevance to energy efficiency, including general or mass-interest media (e.g. ‘The Guardian’ or ‘petrol prices’), broadly ‘green’ or proximate environmental—but not energy-specific—issue areas (e.g. ‘Friends of the Earth’ or ‘recycling’), and finally highly energy-relevant content (e.g. ‘Energy Savings Trust’ or ‘compact fluorescent light bulbs’). This coding strategy accommodated responses which were geared toward either content or media source. Inter-coder reliability was computed (see Appendix F) with an *r*-value of .900, well above the generally accepted minimum of .750.

## **SAMPLING STRATEGY AND LIMITATIONS**

The study sought online media connectors primarily on Internet forums and email-based discussion groups designed around focused areas of interest, such as cycling, organic gardening, and DIY projects. Appendix B contains a full list of the sites and communities approached, categorized by the broad topic of interest under which they are organized. These communities were located via simple web searches directed at a variety of interest areas, sought based on their loose proximity to ethical, ecological, or healthy lifestyle choices. This decision was founded on my own assumption that media connectors expressing aspects of banal environmentalism would already be engaged in proximate consumptive activities loosely, but not directly, related to energy efficiency. In the interests of comparatively testing this theory, I also attempted to recruit ‘activist’ participants from the sites of environmentalist groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. Though

these sites' forums enjoyed a high degree of traffic, the level of response to the survey was surprisingly small and did not afford a sufficient number of respondents to conduct tests of statistical inference.

Hoping to reach active micro public spheres, I only posted solicitations to discussion communities that appeared to have a high rate of activity, with multiple messages posted daily. I also intentionally attempted to focus on sites and communities serving a primarily UK-based audience. This was an inherently difficult proposition, however, and I did not strictly avoid the responses of individuals from other geographic areas. Indeed, as the data show (see Appendix D), respondents' locations ultimately varied independently of most of the key indicators of banal environmentalism.

It should be openly acknowledged here that many of the above methodological decisions were made subjectively on my own intuition of how to best pursue media connectors exhibiting aspects of banal environmentalism. The study is neither designed nor qualified to make comparative assertions about banal environmentalism in populations of non-media connectors, nor to attempt to quantify the comparative frequency with which media connectors exhibit these traits. True to the research question, the primary focus of this study is to explore the dynamic relationships within and between distinct aspects of banal environmentalism, not to identify groups within the population who are most likely to exhibit those qualities. As such, the measures of statistical inference below are only relevant to the population of media connectors from which the project sampled, who were selected as primary candidates for exhibiting these traits based on the work of Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007). Their role is thus important but ultimately tangential to the core goals of the research.

## **DIALOGUE AND EVOLUTION**

A final methodological note worth mentioning lies in the experience of interacting with respondents. Despite the traditionally impersonal nature of quantitative methodology—particularly an electronic survey—it became clear early in the piloting phase of the project that the online media connectors responding to the survey were interested in some measure of dialogue. Outside of the media mapping exercise, the initial draft of the survey contained few opportunities for interaction: there was an option at the end of the form to sign up to receive a copy of the completed report, and I often included my email address when posting

the survey to discussion communities in case any potential respondents had questions or concerns. Based on the feedback received, I added several optional, open-ended explanation boxes throughout the survey so that respondents could contextualize their answers. Roughly a quarter chose to do so; several others decided to reach out via email or discuss the survey within their communities.

While I did not develop a standardized coding frame for interpreting this data in the ultimate analysis, it was a useful for refining the survey during its early piloting phases. Comments from respondents led to the re-phrasing of multiple question items, the correction of a few minor typos, and the decision to add more content to the survey rather than subtract it. Initially, I had been concerned that the survey length (estimated at approximately ten minutes) would be an insurmountable deterrent to respondents, and that many would drop out within the first few sections. There was indeed a relatively large dropout rate—officially calculated by the survey software at 35.29%, or 168 dropouts out of 476 total starts, though some of these completed a great deal of the survey and were included in analysis. The enthusiasm of those who did finish the survey, however, encouraged me to seek a greater depth of data.

In a wider perspective, this unexpected level of interaction from media connectors is significant in two ways. First, it is an initial affirmation of the fact that pursuing particularistic online communities is a useful strategy to reach active media connectors whose identities are highly mediated, and who are passionate enough about the projection of those identities to not only complete a lengthy survey but go beyond its requirements in explaining their self-characterizations. Secondly, it is a promising insight for future research with this group, indicating an opportunity to access a wealth of qualitative data offered willingly by such respondents.

## 5. RESULTS

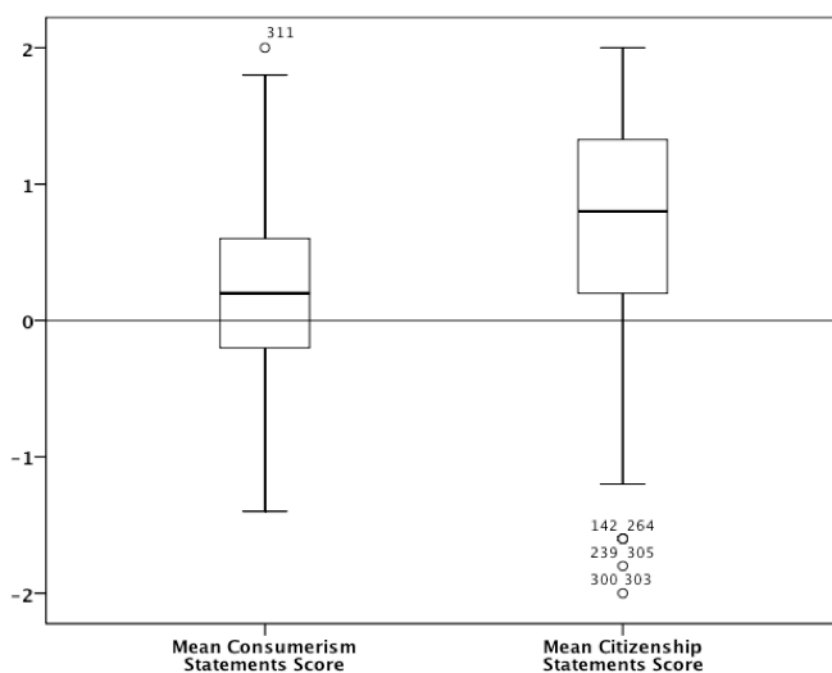
The following section begins by reviewing descriptive statistics for each pair of key measures of banal environmentalism: narrative citizenship and consumerism statements, issue and practice scores, and comparative self-concept alongside intent to change. Next, I will review measures of both particularistic and energy-related media connection, for the latter outlining in detail the dimensions of intentionality, perceived credibility, relevance obtained in the media mapping exercise. These measures will then be compared against demographic control variables as well as the content areas of the micro public spheres from which participants were recruited. Finally, I will analyze linear regression models of narrative citizenship and consumerism as a tool for identifying significant predictive variables.

### QUANTIFYING CITIZENSHIP AND CONSUMERISM

A graphic analysis of the distributions of mean aggregate citizen and consumerism statements (Figure 2) reveals that responses within the sample are predominately, if guardedly, positive to both narrative dimensions—more so to the former. At a 95% confidence level, we can expect mean consumerism scores to be between .134 and .277 in the population of media connectors from which the project sampled; the mean citizenship by

contrast, is expected to be between .625 and .807—between .395 and .625 points (192% to 392%) greater than that of consumerism. Given that a score of '0' is coded as "neutral" and '1' is coded as "agree, this is best contextualized in the understanding that the population of media connectors is most likely to soundly agree with citizenship statements,

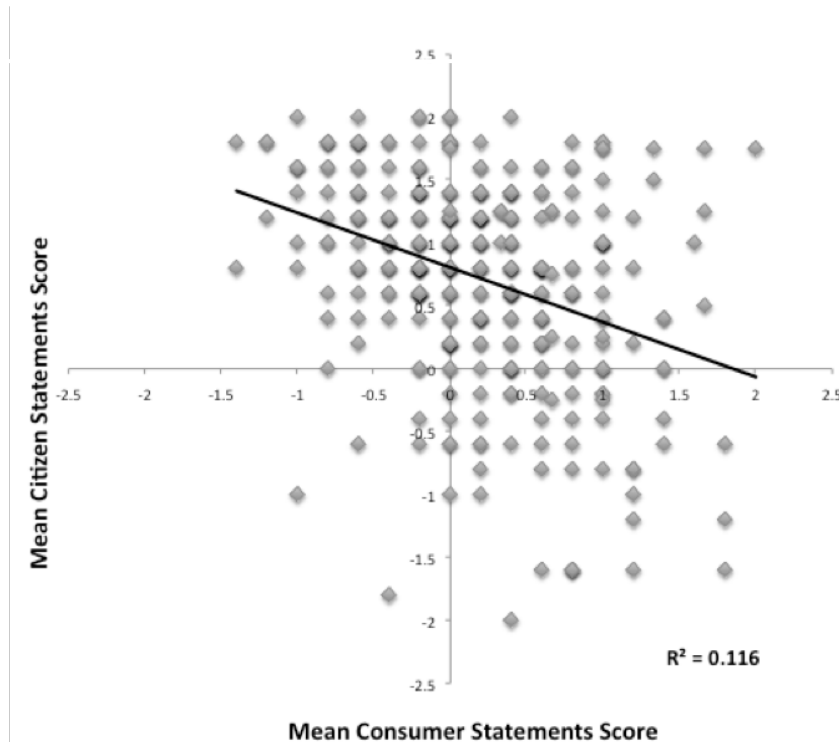
**Figure 2:** Mean Aggregate Citizenship and Consumerism Statement Scores



while more cautiously favoring—but still largely agreeing with—consumerism statements at the same time.

The relationship between aggregate citizenship and consumerism attitudes is more complex than these summary statistics describe, however. A correlation analysis reveals a negative linear association ( $r = -.341$ ,  $p < .001$ ) between the sample distributions, implying that individuals who agree more strongly with citizenship statements tend to agree less strongly with consumerism statements. As visualized in Figure 3 and confirmed by the modest coefficient of determination ( $r^2 = .116$ ), this is a distinct but by no means strict

**Figure 3:** Scatter Plot of Mean Aggregate Citizen and Consumer Statement Scores



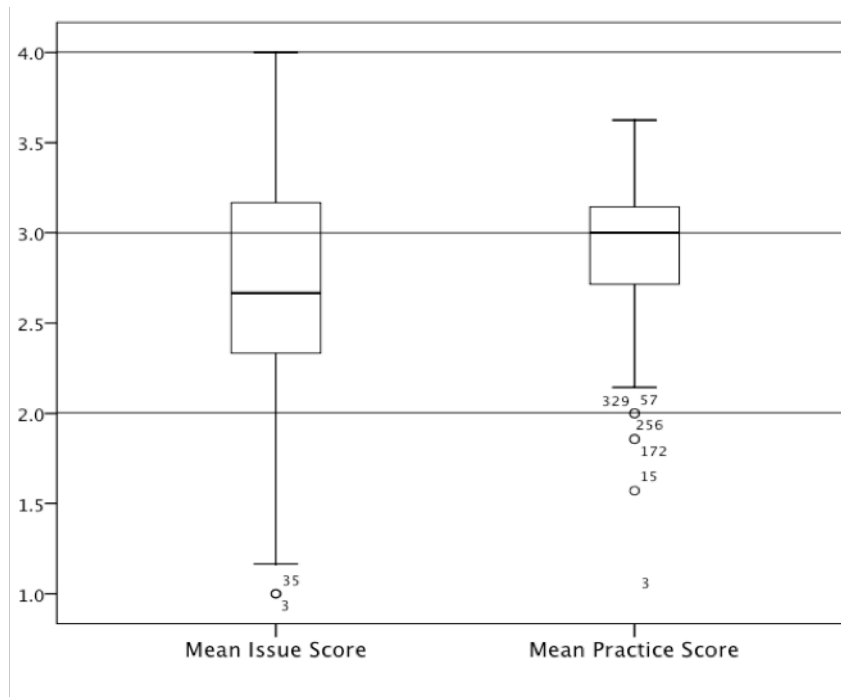
relationship; the prediction of negative linear association explains only 11.6% of the variance between the two measures. This model, however inaccurate, corroborates the relatively more constrained and neutral sample distribution of consumer scores (compared to citizen scores) in its

prediction that individuals who disagree most strongly (-2) with consumer-motivated statements will agree most emphatically (2) with citizenship-oriented statements, but those on the other end of the spectrum who agree most with consumerism oriented sentiments (2) will score roughly neutral in their aggregate feelings on citizenship.



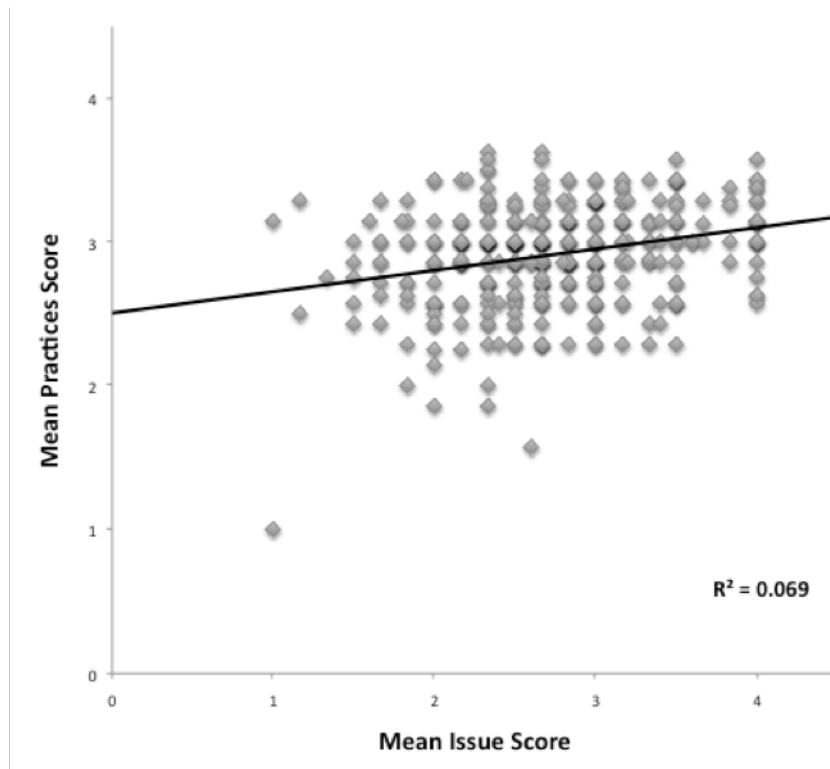
As with citizenship and consumer measures, mean practice and issue scores exhibit a significant ( $t = 4.51$ ;  $p < .001$ ) but more modest variance at all conventional levels, where mean practice scores are projected to be between .103 and .263 points higher than mean issue scores (see distributions of each variable plotted in Figure 4). Also noteworthy in this

**Figure 4:** Sample Distributions of Mean Issue and Practice Scores



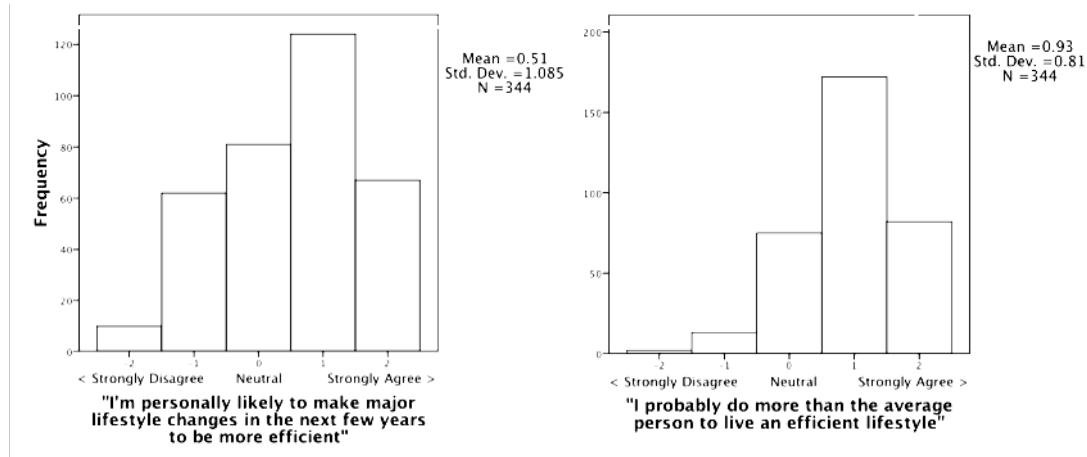
distribution analysis is the comparatively greater variance in the mean issue score sample distribution, implying a significantly greater diversity of opinion and range of engagement within issue areas compared to actual practices. Practice and issue variables are also share a statistically significant positive linear correlation ( $r = .263$ ,  $p$

$< .001$ ), implying that individuals who are more aware of and engaged in issues tend to be more likely to also be aware of and engaged in energy-efficient lifestyle practices, though the magnitude of this association ( $r^2 = .069$ ) is even less than that of the correlation between aggregate citizenship and consumer statements, explaining just 6.9% of the variance between these measures (see Figure 5 for a chart of sample issue scores plotted against practice scores).

**Figure 5:** Scatter Plot of Mean Issue and Practice Scores

The final measures of banal environmentalism relevant here relate not to the internal definitions described above, but begin to touch on individuals' relationships to others around them and to themselves in the future. The agree-disagree statements were worded "I'm personally likely to make *major lifestyle changes* in the next few years to be more efficient" and "I probably do *more than the average person* to live an efficient lifestyle" (emphasized text was bold when delivered in the survey). The sample distributions of each ordinal, categorical variable are visualized in Figure 6. At a 95% level of confidence, we can expect the a population self-concept score of between .84 and 1.01, indicating that media connectors tend to solidly agree that they live more efficient lifestyles than those around them. Their intentions to make major lifestyle changes in the future are also positive but significantly more ambivalent, with a population mean score of between .40 and .63 at a 95% confidence level.

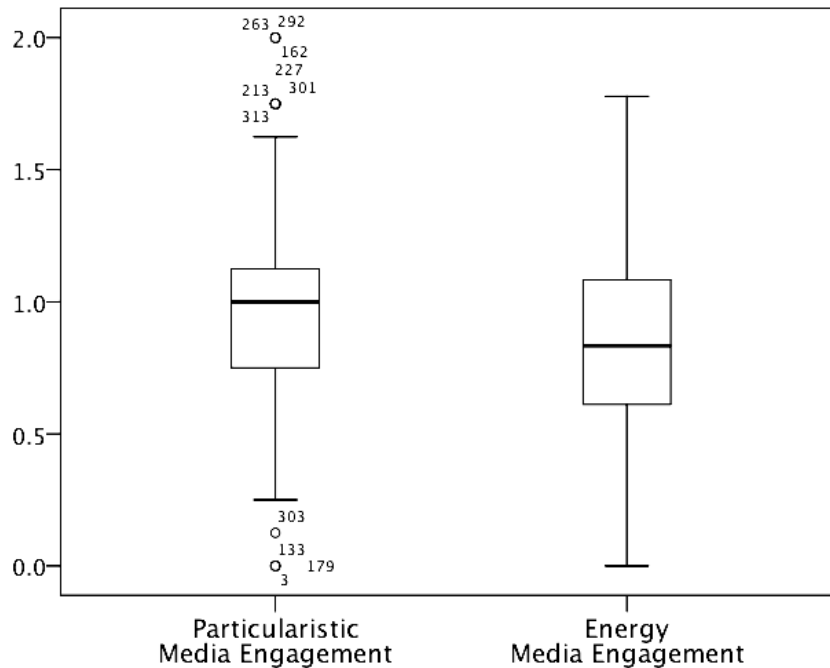
**Figure 6:** Sample Distribution of Individuals' Self-Identification with Others and the Future



## MEASURING RELEVANT MEDIA CONNECTION

The most basic measures of media connection are aggregate values assembled for both the micro public sphere context from which participants were recruited and the energy-related media about which they were questioned. Each measure is based on two variables—first, respondents' identification of media formats in which they engaged with the topic and, second, their self-described level of engagement ranging from occasional and passive encounters to regular, active contribution of content. Sample distributions of these media engagement indices are pictured in Figure 7. Not surprisingly, the data suggests that respondents recruited from micro public spheres tend to have a higher level of engagement with the particularistic media of their interest than with media containing energy-related content ( $t = -4.457$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The magnitude of that difference, however, is hardly dramatic—between only .189 and .073 points at a 95% level of confidence. The measures are also positively correlated ( $r = .343$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that media connectors with a higher level of engagement in particularistic media are also likely to be more engaged in energy media—implicitly, in media in general.

**Figure 7:** Sample Distributions of Particularistic and Energy Media Engagement Scores



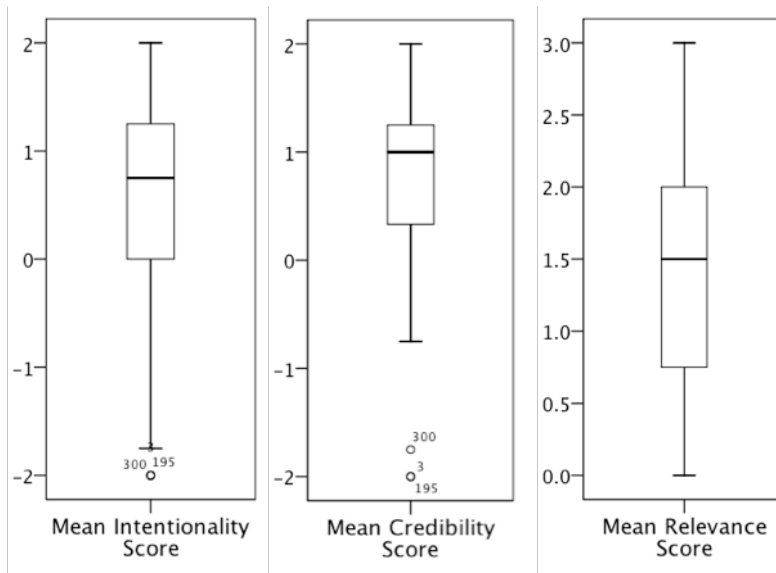
Via the media mapping exercise described in the methodology section, the survey looked more closely at energy media connection by asking respondents to identify specific examples of energy-related media they had recently encountered and rate that media on both their level of intentionality in encountering it and their perception of its credibility. The repetition of this activity across four media categories reveals an interesting, though somewhat tangential, comparative analysis between online, broadcast, and print media (see Appendix G for data) suggesting users of online and print media are more likely to both actively seek and find credible, energy-relevant information than consumers of broadcast media. This inference may be somewhat biased by the sampling strategy of recruiting media connectors already active online, but at the same time is corroborated by higher scores in the print and 'other' categories and is consistent with the more specific and particularistic nature of web-based information (Dahlgren, 2005).

These three measures are more useful to the ultimate analysis of energy citizenship when considered in aggregate, however, and in an effort to generalize them across media formats new variables were calculated based on the mean scores of each response. These aggregate calculations were made only for respondents who replied to at least three of the possible four media format categories; as all of these responses were optional and many

individuals left some of them blank, the sample size of aggregate intentionality, credibility, and relevance data ( $n = 135, 132,$  and  $136$  respectively) is significantly smaller than the total survey sample size ( $n = 347$ ).

Figure 8 displays summary statistics for the distributions of these aggregate variables. More than 75% of the sample recorded positive mean intentionality and credibility scores, suggesting that media connectors do tend to actively seek energy-related information outside of their particularistic public spheres of interest, and feel rewarded by the information they encounter. However, the vast majority of these reported energy

**Figure 8:** Sample Distributions of Mean Media Map Intentionality, Credibility, and Relevance Scores



information sources score, in aggregate, below a mean of 2.0 points; suggesting that what is sought by these media connectors is, both in content and in source, largely encountered in the context of either general, mass-appeal media sources and topic areas, or in a broader field of so-called 'green' media and information.

## Measures of Control

Appendix D displays relevant statistical measures of association between a selection of demographic variables and all the key banal environmentalism indicators explored in the previous sections, as well as a similar comparison of distinct 'micro' public sphere topic areas. These measurements were accomplished by re-coding the continuous variables of aggregate mean citizen, consumer, practice, issue, and media scores into categorical, ordinal groupings. As a means of applying the gamma test of ordinal significance, site of entry categories (defined by topic) were also redefined into separate, dichotomous variables coded "1" for respondents within a given topic category and "0" for all others. Though the project

recruited across more than ten topic categories, the table below considers only the five categories from which a sufficient number of individuals responded.

There are a handful of statistically significant associations observed between measures of banal environmentalism and micro public sphere topic area. For example, respondents who participate in vegetarian and/or vegan discussion communities are more likely to agree with both consumer ( $\gamma = .461, p = .001$ ) and citizen ( $\gamma = .360, p = .002$ ) statement scores and tend to have a more positive comparative self concept ( $\gamma = .690, p < .001$ ), while those who participate in outdoors-oriented sites tend to have a lower citizen statement score ( $\gamma = -.397, p < .001$ ), are less likely to believe they will make lifestyle changes ( $\gamma = -.389, p = .001$ ) and have a lower comparative self-concept ( $\gamma = -.501, p < .001$ ). However, such significant associations are hardly consistent across the board; the absence of such regular co-variances seems to indicate that the topic area of micro public sphere is not a determining factor in media connectors' expressions of energy citizenship.

As Appendix D illustrates, significance tests comparing measures of banal environmentalism to demographics reveal similar results. There are a few interesting correlations, such as the tendency for women to score lower on issue awareness-engagement than men ( $\gamma = -.352, p < .001$ ) but be more likely to score higher in citizenship statements ( $\gamma = .307, p < .001$ ) as well as report both a greater likelihood to make lifestyle changes ( $\gamma = .330, p < .001$ ) and a have a higher comparative self-concept ( $\gamma = .401, p < .001$ ). Again, however, these statistically significant correlations are not consistent throughout and are thus only interesting within the specific contexts of their occurrence. On the whole, demographic measures do not appear to be any more reliable indicators of banal environmentalism than do the particularistic content areas of micro public spheres.

The macro-level inconsistency of statistically significant correlations here is, in many ways, a more interesting observation than the scattered combinations of reliable covariance. The sample data corroborate the notion that media connection and banal environmentalism vary independently of traditional identity hierarchies of geography, age, and level of education among the population from which the project sampled. For example, independent-sample t-tests fail to reject the null hypothesis of equal variance between UK and US respondents for mean issue engagement scores, practice scores, and consumer statements scores ( $p = .778, .780$ , and  $.300$  respectively); and while there is a statistically significant difference in mean citizen statement scores ( $p = .005$ ), the magnitude of that

difference is itself negligible in context—it is estimated that media connectors in the US only score between .093 and .534 points less than UK respondents at a 95% level of confidence. These observations cannot be easily overlooked as an issue of sample bias; respondents varied relatively evenly across age, education and income groups.

## **PREDICTING NARRATIVE CITIZENSHIP AND CONSUMERISM**

Searching for such reliable predictors becomes, then, a more complicated matter of correlations between individual indicators of banal environmentalism. Appendix E contains a correlation matrix measuring linear association between each of the key internal banal environmentalism indicators as well as the external factors of media connection, comparative self-concept, and intention to act. In spite of any ideal type assumptions, the data suggests these variables are, on the whole, inconsistently correlated with one another.

The strongest positive associations appear to be tied to mean aggregate citizenship scores. That variable is associated in a statistically significant positive linear relationship with mean practice scores ( $r = .425$ ,  $p < .001$ ), self-reported likelihood to make major lifestyle changes ( $r = .592$ ), and self-perception of energy efficiency in relation to others ( $r = .451$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Not surprisingly, in other words, those who are more likely to agree with citizenship statements are also more likely to be aware of and engaged in energy-efficient consumption activities both now and in the future—and they know it. Agreement with consumer sentiments, on the other hand, maintains a loosely negative correlation not only with aggregate citizenship scores ( $r = -.341$ ,  $p < .001$ ) but to a lesser extent also with practice scores ( $r = -.127$ ,  $p = .024$ ), likelihood to make lifestyle changes ( $r = -.182$ ,  $p = .001$ ), and self-image in relation to others ( $r = -.141$ ,  $p = .012$ ). These three latter associations, while statistically significant, can hardly be interpreted as reliably predictive—none of them are able to explain more than 3.5% of the variance with aggregate consumer statement scores ( $r^2 = .016$ ,  $.033$ , and  $.020$  respectively). Mean issue engagement scores exhibit an even lower degree of association with other critical indicators, sharing a coefficient of determination ( $r^2$ ) of just  $.033$  with aggregate citizenship statements, and no statistically significant correlation with lifestyle change likelihood or consumer statement scores.

Multivariate regression analysis was then used to identify complex models for predicting key energy citizenship indicators, particularly mean aggregate citizenship and consumerism statement scores. Consistent with other quantitative analysis tools used here,

this technique was not employed in an attempt to define or predict a normative, numerical, and absolute sense of energy citizenship; but rather to leverage the strength of statistical analysis to uncover possible qualitative connections between multiple dimensions within environmentally ethical identity politics.

Assembling a multivariate linear regression model to accurately predict mean citizenship statements was not a difficult matter. The model below, expressed as a linear equation, has a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of .721 and thus an  $r^2$  coefficient of determination of .520, indicating a strong positive correlation between the model and sample mean citizen statement scores which can explain more than half of the variance in those scores. This model essentially suggests that media connectors' level of citizenship is a function of their existing level of energy-efficient practices, their engagement with energy-related media, their judgment of the credibility of that media, and their level of agreement with consumerism-inspired statements. The higher the first three variables, and the lower the latter, the more likely an individual is to agree strongly with citizenship-inspired statements.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Mean Aggregate Citizen Statement Score} = & \\ & (.615)(\text{Mean Practice Score}) \\ & + (.356)(\text{Energy Media Engagement Score}) \\ & + (.271)(\text{Mean Energy Credibility Score}) \\ & - (.564)(\text{Mean Consumer Statement Score}) \\ & - 1.524 \end{aligned}$$

Predicting mean aggregate consumerism statement scores was a more difficult matter, however. No multivariate combination of energy citizenship indicators or media engagement scores could produce a linear regression model with a correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) greater than .500; only a relatively simple model combining mean aggregate citizen statement score with education level could barely break that mark at  $r = .506$ :

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Mean Aggregate Consumer Statement Score} = & \\ & .691 \\ & - (.336)(\text{Mean Citizen Statement Score}) \\ & - (.087)(\text{Highest Level of Education}) \end{aligned}$$

This model, by contrast, explains only 25.6% of the variance in mean aggregate consumer statement scores. More importantly, it fails to integrate any other energy citizenship or media engagement indicators, further suggesting that consumerism-inspired sentiments tend to vary independently of any measure controlled for in this study.



## 6. DISCUSSION

### SUPPORT FOR THE BANAL ENVIRONMENTALISM HYPOTHESIS

The preceding data in many ways supports the banal environmentalism hypothesis outlined at the beginning of this paper; particularly the assumptions that an energy-efficient identity is most likely to be encountered in a mediated environment and expressed via identity-driven consumption decisions that are inherently political. This support is seen most obviously in the relatively strong positive correlation between narrative citizenship statements and energy-efficient practice scores ( $r = .425$ ), an observation implying that consumption decisions are intentionally connected to a conscious narrative of citizenship. The positive agreement with citizenship statements at the foundation of this model matches the notion of banal environmentalism as an intentionally-created and projected narrative of the self, and the positive correlation to consumptive practice actions is consistent with the extent to which these values are articulated through purchase preferences and intentions.

The ties run deeper, however. These two measures are not only positively correlated to one another, but are the only two to share a statistically significant linear relationship with every other indicator of banal environmentalism contained within the study. The data suggests that media connectors who agree more strongly with narrative citizenship statements and exhibit higher levels of consumptive practice are also significantly more likely to report a higher comparative self-concept of efficiency, more of an intention to make efficient lifestyle changes in the near future, and a greater sense of actively seeking out energy-related information across a range of media formats. The positive correlation ( $r=.451$ ) to comparative self-concept can be interpreted as an affirmation of project identity, implying that banal environmentalists actively distinguish themselves against others based on their sense of belonging to the community imagined through their value-driven consumption. An even stronger positive correlation to individuals' self-reported likelihood to make lifestyle changes ( $r=.592$ ) is additional evidence that this identity is significant to both current and future preferences.

Also interesting in this analysis are weak correlations, as well as the variables that do not exhibit statistically significant co-variance. Citizenship statement agreement is significantly, though comparatively quite loosely, associated with civic issue engagement and the relevance of energy media content reported in the media mapping exercise ( $r = .181$

and .262, respectively). These variables do not themselves share a significant association, nor do they consistently co-vary with other indicators of banal environmentalism. Indeed, the actual judged level of relevance of respondent-reported mediated encounters with energy information appears to be quite irrelevant—it varies independently of comparative self-concept, intention to change, and respondents' level of engagement with either energy-related or other particularistic media. In other words, whether individual media connectors are encountering energy efficiency on the nightly news or in a highly specialized publication about wind turbines appears to have little significant bearing on the extent to which they agree with narrative citizenship values or express those values through consumption decisions and intentions.

What does appear to be significant, rather, is the extent to which media connectors view themselves as having sought out that information, and the level of confidence they place in it after their encounters. These variables, along with positive practice scores and negatively-correlated narrative consumerism, build a highly reliable multivariate model for predicting the extent to which media connectors exhibit aspects of narrative citizenship. This is again consistent with the notion of project identity as a highly subjective, contextual, and dynamic process discussed in the theoretical framework above. It falls in line with a long tradition of empirical observations suggesting that media offer a set of 'cultural resources' (Featherstone, 2003: 347) which individuals use to creatively and productively assemble pieces of identity and intention (classics include Miller, 1995; Katz & Liebes, 1990), rather than a Frankfurt-school vision of orchestrated manipulation (e.g. Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) or a distorted Baudrillardian 'hyper-reality' (1983). Indeed, the study suggests that, at least for the population of media connectors from which the project sampled, an energy-efficient identity is a matter of consciously mediated constructions of narrative citizenship articulated and maintained through everyday consumptive decisions.

### **SELF-INTERESTED ANTI-ACTIVISM, OR THE GLIMMER OF A NEW CITIZENSHIP?**

Merely supporting the banal environmentalism hypothesis does not, however, offer an immediately obvious answer to the quagmire of ecological risk on which it is founded. Both the theoretical architecture and the data that defend it are troublingly vague on a critical set of issues. The framing question raised in the introduction remains: to what extent does an everyday, consumption-oriented identity of energy efficiency promise an effective solution to actual environmental challenges? More to the point, does validating the existence

of banal environmentalism imply a pessimistic conclusion that energy efficiency is a temporary fashion borne by self-interested and isolated consumers acting in their own interests and averse to more directly-political forms of action and protest; a movement only as strong as the shifting and unstable cultural conditions which produced it? Or, to the optimistic counterpoint, does the data suggest a fundamental evolution in both civic engagement and environmental awareness driven by a new form of political agency and expression found in the intentional consumption decisions of individuals projecting a common imagined identity; a long-awaited if anti-climactic culmination of decades of activists' rhetoric trickling down to mass culture in the form of fluorescent light bulbs and solar powered water heaters?

The short answer, as is of course the case with any such falsely dichotomous theatrics, is 'neither'; it is the tension between these extremes that is most interesting and productive to explore. On the surface, the data collected here seem to more solidly reject the former, pessimistic option. Agreement with narrative statements of self-interested consumerism, while certainly present in the population of media connectors, shares either a weakly negative correlation with measures of banal environmentalism or varies entirely independently of them. Consumerism is furthermore impossible to predict with any degree of reliability using a multivariate combination these measures. Investigating the mysteries of what drives such overt self-interest seems to be a matter for another study and essentially irrelevant to the notion of banal environmentalism as operationalized here. If media connectors are projecting environmentally-ethical identities for entirely selfish reasons, it would appear that they are doing so either unconsciously or deceptively. Indeed, it is a great deal more plausible to assume that the narrative identities projected under banal environmentalism exhibit a degree of genuine authenticity.

This does not, however, amount to sufficient evidence to embrace the optimistic counterpoint. Despite the presence of positive citizenship projection and consumptive practice to reinforce it, the data suggests that awareness of and engagement in current energy issues, as well as exposure to highly relevant energy media, remains distinctly varied across the population of media connectors and does not correlate strongly or even significantly with other dimensions of banal environmentalism. In other words, the study implies that environmental agency expressed through consumption may not be dependent on awareness of or even an interest in the broader context of energy issues and events, either in the terrestrial or mediated environment. It is thus possible that the cultural context

in which values of environmental citizenship are formed and projected may be founded on a severely limited, abstract understanding of actual ecological challenges; that responses of consumptive agency may be uncoordinated with or even counterproductive to the actual needs of natural reality.

Should this indeed be the case, the marketing of 'green' products is caught in an interesting ethical and operational conundrum. The need to appeal to a project identity based on consumptive agency and disassociated from overtly political environmental activism is real and justified. However, by abstracting ecological context, this very act of disassociation could be undermining both the legitimacy of the project identity and the efficacy of the consumptive action it depends upon—effectively threatening the marketplace for 'green' goods in the first place, regardless of their positioning. This is the critical market failure that John Grant's (2007) optimism overlooks. The manifesto of the mainstreaming of 'green' assumes, at some level, an enduring context of fiscal and cultural incentives to act efficiently and ethically. It fails to consider the fact that this context is not a direct product of objective conditions but rather an indirect, mediated, and highly contingent construction in which the actions of marketers in the mediated environment are highly influential and perhaps, in the long term, even self-destructive.

Extending this speculation, ongoing critical research seeking to understand mediated banal environmentalism also faces distinctly puzzling challenges. Measuring the extent to which ethical and efficient project identities deviate from 'actual' ethical and efficient positions requires a measure of objective definition beyond the scope of media research and indeed contentious within any discipline. Furthermore, as a consumptive and thus in many ways passive expression of everyday identity, banal environmentalism may never be effectively studied head-on. Asking individuals to articulate their motives and aspirations in words instead of consumptive actions fundamentally changes the nature of their projected identities, and will bias any such research agenda toward more traditionally civic- and activist-leaning individuals. At the same time, however, merely observing the contours of banal environmentalism indirectly through purchase patterns and narrative indicators leaves future research agendas vulnerable a great deal of speculation and spurious association between empirical observation and reliable analysis.

## **CONCESSIONS, CONFESSIONS, AND A CALL FOR MORE WORK**

Reasons to be cautious and critical of this data, and particularly the speculative inferences drawn from it, are numerous. This paper has described a provisional study conducted with limited resources in the context of emergent and underexplored terrain, both theoretical and operational, and as such should not be interpreted as anything more than the academic equivalent of bushwhacking. Specific areas of anticipated concern include the extent to which measured statements, issues, and practices are indeed representative of actual banal environmentalism dimensions; the fact that variables of citizenship and consumerism were measured primarily in the context of energy efficiency and not related to broader value statements; and the data set's limitation to online media connectors. This latter concern was originally founded on the assumption, following Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham (2007), that the population of media connectors may be a fertile source of banal environmentalism. The study largely corroborates this assumption both in the large proportion of respondents who scored positively across key indicators, as well as the significant—though often weak—positive correlations between particularistic media engagement and most other indicators. However, this design does not enable comparative conclusions about other populations and variables influencing banal environmentalism.

Indeed, the provisional evidence uncovered here in support of the banal environmentalism hypothesis is in no way a conclusion, but rather an invitation to and validation for a great deal more empirical investigation. Future studies will need to design methods of reaching beyond online media connectors, tapping into the truly 'everyday' nature of the banal environmentalism experience. They will need to dig deeper than the relatively superficial proxy measures employed here; to find ways of methodologically and ontologically accommodating the multilayered and subtle complexities of an energy efficient identity projected and articulated through consumption decisions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Regardless of its shortcomings and challenges, this study has taken an important step forward in understanding the nature of contemporary environmental consumption. It has opened a theoretical understanding of ecologically-aware agency which is independent of the overt political activism of past environmental movements, and instead relies on individual consumer decisions made in the context of the mediated environment and driven by an everyday identity of banal environmentalism. It has offered key empirical observations of support for that hypothesis within a sample population of online media connectors, collecting statistically significant evidence that narrative ecological citizenship values correlate strongly with measures of mediation and consumptive practice but independently of traditional political issue engagement. It has identified the multifaceted ramifications of these observations for both the marketplace and the academy. Specifically, it has forced us to problematize the extent to which intentionally capitalizing on banal environmentalism for ecological, fiscal or intellectual profit could actually undermine the values and intentions that drive it.

There is yet a deeper paradox lurking behind these observations that merits a moment of concluding contemplation. Beck and others are certainly correct in exposing the subjective notion of 'nature' as it is conceived of and projected in identities by individuals; this ontological step is foundational to the rest of the framework outlined here. Such a realization does not, however, absolve our analysis from the fact that an objective nature—built of rocks and trees and atmosphere, full of polluters and the polluted—is also a very real fact that cannot be ignored. Silverstone (2006) and Beck (1995) would both agree: understanding this tangible, singular nature will always be an exercise in intangible, multifaceted mediation. Such a paradox need not relegate further analysis to an epistemological dead-end, however. It is rather a timely challenge to re-embrace the interdisciplinary imperative on which media studies are founded yet all too often betray in the rationalized inevitabilities of academic departments and specified journals. Advancing an understanding of banal environmentalism, and building an operational agenda upon it, is not a task achievable by critical media research alone. In addition to a greater exploration of the mediated identity politics driving individual decisions, further research will also demand an open dialogue with both the scientific realities of ecological risk and the market realities of growing green business. Indeed, to the extent that John Grant (2007) sees himself as a marketer reaching out to the 'other side' of environmental activism and scientific scholarship,

this paper is a call to reach back. The middle ground that we can and must seek is an understanding of ecologically-responsible action grounded both in mediated and material reality; equally viable for business, the planet, and our fundamentally dynamic identities.

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