

Abstract

Introduction

The pollution of landscapes and coastal environments with plastic shopping bag litter is an escalating global problem. The introduction of plastic bag tax aimed at addressing this challenge achieved limited success in South Africa. This study explores South African shoppers' perceptions towards social marketing anchored retailer voluntary initiatives, which is an emerging plastic bag policy option.

Literature

Adverse environmental and social effects of plastic shopping bags are discussed. Retailer voluntary initiatives used to de-market plastic shopping bags, including jurisdictions where they were implemented, are also reviewed. The focus is on retailer anti-plastic bag initiatives such as 'reusable shopping bags' and 'plastic bag-free' shops.

Methods

This study is situated within a constructivist research paradigm and a qualitative methodology. Data were collected from a sample of 31 grocery shoppers recruited from retailer outlets in South Africa's metropolitan cities, Johannesburg and Pretoria. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore shoppers' perceptions towards retailer-driven anti-plastic bag voluntary initiatives. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse interview data.

Findings

The findings of this study highlight shoppers' negative perceptions towards retailer anti-plastic bag voluntary initiatives. Shoppers perceived retailer anti-plastic bag voluntary initiatives as forms of green capitalism, green entrepreneurship, symbolic corporate social responsibility, strategic business posture, commandeered green consumerism, measured environmental morality, masked green washing and calculated pre-emptive behaviour. Future studies may seek to extend the generalisability of these findings by using a larger sample size.

Conclusion

The study's findings highlight the trust deficit associated with retailer anti-plastic bags voluntary initiatives and the importance of enhancing market acceptance and legitimacy. Mistrust and cynicism directed towards retailer anti-plastic bag voluntary initiatives point to the importance of consumer education aimed at emphasising the negative effects of single-use plastic shopping bags. This study concludes that reliance on retailer self-regulation may not be the best approach to solve the escalating problem of plastic bag litter. We argue that national governments need to implement interventions that strike a balance between environmental sustainability and economic development.