Green and Guilt Free: the Role of Guilt in Determining the Effectiveness of Environmental Appeals in Advertising

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Consumer support for advertising appeals that feature environmental attributes (“green” marketing) is equivocal. Across three studies we show that consumers in situations characterized by heightened implicit guilt will favor green marketing appeals. Further, consumer preference for green marketing in these situations is found without the use of an explicit guilt appeal.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Virtually every product available on the market can boast at least some environmentally-friendly attributes. But consumer response to marketers’ positioning their offerings on the basis environmental attributes—so-called green marketing—is relatively unstudied, and has produced equivocal results. Consumers’ concern for the environment does not predict responsiveness to green marketing, or marketing communications that positions itself on the basis of environmental attributes (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995). One promising stream of research examines the role of marketing communications in stimulating consumer demand for green products. However, the efficacy of green marketing strategies remains equivocal (e.g., Kangun, Carlson and Grove 1991; Montoro-Rios, Luque-Martinez and Rodriguez-Molina 2008) and research examining how consumers can be motivated to engage in environmentally friendly actions is relatively understudied (Goldstein, Cialdini and Griskevicius 2008).

In this article we examine the process by which the implicit anticipation of guilt leads consumers to make product selections in favor of marketing communications that highlight environmentally-friendly attributes. While previous research has examined explicit guilt appeals that directly induce consumer guilt, we find that the increased prominence of environmental information in advertising is itself enough to alleviate consumer guilt in situations where guilt has been implicitly activated. Across three studies we find that consumers respond most positively to environmental appeals when the product category is hedonic in nature, when the setting is public, and when relevant social norms are activated. We find evidence that green marketing can be successful in guiding consumer choice, and that this effect is mediated through anticipatory guilt.

Study 1 used brands in a hedonic category (Chocolate: Mars and Cadbury) and utilitarian category (Soap: Dove and Ivory), each positioned via a green appeal or a performance-based appeal (e.g., taste, cleansing ingredients). Information in each appeal was held constant. The design of either appeal was based on color, images and prominence given to environmental attributes.

Participants (n=99) in the hedonic category responded more positively to the green appeal (74% chose the brand promoted through a green appeal versus 26% for the brand that used a performance-based appeal). Those in the utilitarian category responded more to the performance-based appeal (67% versus 33% for the green appeal), $\chi^2(1)=22.365, p<.001$. Mediation analysis to test for the role of anticipatory guilt confirms that the preference for the green appeal is based on implicit guilt related to the product category. To test for mediation through anticipatory guilt, first guilt was regressed on the product category, which was significant ($\beta=1.996, t=10.269, p<.001$). Next, the product choice (choice corresponding to either the green or performance-based appeal) was regressed on guilt using logistic regression, which was also significant ($\beta=1.904, Wald=26.124, p<.001$). Product choice was regressed on product category, which was also significant ($\beta=-2.070, Wald=20.456, p<.001$), and finally product choice was regressed on both product category and guilt. Product category was no longer significant ($\beta=1.029, Wald=1.565, p=.211$) while guilt was highly significant ($\beta=-2.239, Wald=22.388, p<.001$). A Sobel test (Baron and Kenny 1986) was significant as well, $z=4.583, p<.001$.

Study 2 (n=119) uses the presence of others as the basis for stimulating anticipatory guilt and promoting response to green marketing appeals. Two brands of granola bars (Kellogg’s and Quaker) were used, and offered to participants through either a green or performance-based appeal. Participants viewed the ads and selected products either alone or as part of a small group. As expected, those in the group condition favored the green appeals (68% versus 32% selection based on the performance-based appeal). In the alone condition, appeals were equally successful (49% green versus 51% performance-based), $\chi^2(1)=4.518, p=.034$.

Mediation analysis again confirms the role of anticipatory guilt in the preference for green appeals. The regression of guilt on setting (group versus alone) was significant ($\beta=-.427, t=-2.63, p=.01$), as was the regression of product choice (product corresponding to either the green or performance-based appeal) on guilt ($\beta=-.831, Wald=10.671, p=.001$). Product choice was regressed on setting, which was also significant ($\beta=8.03, Wald=4.452, p=.035$), and finally product choice was regressed on both product category and guilt. Product category was no longer significant ($\beta=-.570, Wald=2.01, p=.156$) while guilt was highly significant ($\beta=-.771, Wald=8.95, p=.003$). The Sobel test was significant as well, $z=2.052, p=.02$.

In study 3 (n=111) we manipulate the relevant social norms and seek to either stimulate perceived expectations to respond to a green appeal, or give participants “permission” to choose a product based on performance-based (i.e., self-serving) appeals. The same brands of granola from study 2 were used, but prior to the experiment participants were primed with the relevant social norm (White and Peloza 2009). As expected, green appeals were more successful in the environmental norm prime condition (64% versus 36%) but in the product performance prime, participants responded to the performance-based appeal 57% of the time, $\chi^2(1)=5.020, p=.025$.

Mediation analysis again confirms the role of anticipatory guilt in participants’ product selection. The regression of guilt on norm manipulation (environmental versus product performance) was significant ($\beta=-.818, t=-4.309, p<.001$), as was the regression of product choice (choice corresponding to either green or performance-based appeal) on guilt ($\beta=-.526, Wald=7.318, p=.007$). The regression of product choice norm manipulation was significant ($\beta=5.854, Wald=4.943, p=.026$), and finally, product choice was regressed on both product category and guilt. Product category was no longer significant ($\beta=.534, Wald=6.653, p=.199$) while guilt was significant ($\beta=-.433, Wald=4.471, p=.034$). The Sobel test was significant as well, $z=2.689, p=.003$.

REFERENCES


