Closing the green gap: understanding why green consumers choose brown products

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Conference article with published abstract

Cite this conference article as:


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Closing the Green Gap: understanding why green consumers choose the brown products.

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This study investigates the impact of in-store marketing and packaging elements on green shopping behavior, aiming to further understand the attitude-behavior Green Gap. The results of first, a choice experiment with 127 respondents and second an eye-tracking experiment with 67 respondents show implications for the retail industry.

Keywords: visual attention, in-store marketing, green consumer behavior

Introduction

Green consumers are concerned by the environment so they think about the environmental consequences of their shopping behavior (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972; Kinnear et al., 1974; Webster, 1975; Brooker, 1976; Roberts, 1996; Diamantopoulos et al., 2003). Manufacturers and retailers who develop an assertive green marketing strategy try to meet the needs of this growing and fruitful market segment. However, the green marketing literature is puzzled by the Green Gap: consumers with a high concern for the environment but a low green shopping behavior (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; De Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006; Young et al., 2010; Litvine & Wüstenhagen, 2011; Grunert et al., 2014).

Even though previous research finds that consumers’ environmental concern influence green behavior, this covert influence of internal attitudes does not explain why green products account for such a low market share. However, the consumers’ choice process can be influenced by the overt effects of
awareness messages such as “[…] environmental warnings and possible environmental consequences” and by the product characteristics “[…] but also styles of presentation for them” (Lin & Huang, 2012, p.16). An under-researched area is the study of the external influences preventing green consumers to behave accordingly to their attitudes. Excluding the covert effects of consumers’ preferences and behavioral intentions on the choice process of green products (Litvine & Wüstenhagen, 2011; Kalafatis et al., 1999), what are the overt effects of the information provided to the consumer in a supermarket? Intrinsically, the green consumer is most influenced by the retailers’ in-store marketing practices, such as the point-of-purchase (PoP) information display and the servicescape (Henion, 1972; Gleim et al., 2013; Mejri et al., 2012; Tsarenko et al., 2013); and the manufacturers’ product packaging displaying various information, such as method and origin of production, ingredients or third-party certifications and labels (Sammer & Wüstenhagen, 2006; Horne, 2009; Murphy & Jenner-Leuthart, 2011).

This study aims to understand the choice process of green consumers and in particular the impact of information on the choice process of green products: (1) price tags, (2) labels and certifications, (3) verbal and pictorial information, and (4) servicescape. The research combines a choice experiment with 130 respondents and an eye-tracking experiment with 67 respondents to shed light on the impact of in-store marketing and packaging elements on green shopping behavior.

**STUDY 1 – choice experiment**

In this first experiment, 127 respondents (48% women) were asked to choose among various food products: kidney beans (43%), coffee (40%) or tomato sauce (17%). First, they were individually asked to choose among three product alternatives: classic, organic and fair-trade. After choosing a product, the customer filled in a questionnaire to map their eco-friendly behavior based
on established scales. Preliminary results show that 36% of the respondents chose the classic alternative, 28% chose the organic alternative, and 35% chose the fair-trade alternative as well as that consumers who perform more eco-friendly behaviors are more likely to choose a green product.

**STUDY 2 – eye-tracking experiment**

In the second experiment, 67 participants (49% female) were individually asked to wear eye-tracking glasses\(^1\) in an experimental supermarket. The projective technique was used (Luchs *et al.*, 2010) such as participants were instructed to buy products for someone else, in the form of a shopping list of four items.

The experiment took place in a convenience supermarket mock-up at Linköping University. There were five shelves, filled with products from ICA: tomato sauce, kidney beans, coffee and softeners. Each shelf contained a range of product alternatives: classic products, ecological products, and fair-trade products. From a green choice perspective, the products were differentiable with their labels (LABEL) and their wording (TEXT). The same prices (PRICE) and product arrangement as they are at ICA were implemented—low-cost products on the bottom, high-quality products on the top of the shelf—and the participants were provided with a shopping cart. The idea was to offer a shopping experience as close as possible to ICA supermarkets, but with a green servicescape (ECOSCAPE). Therefore, items evoking countryside or agriculture were displayed around the shelves, such as: plants, WWF posters, wood, a green carpet, wooden baskets, etc.

There were two different experimental conditions: a control group (46% of the respondents) and a treatment group (54%). The only difference between both

\(^1\) The respondents' eye-movements were measured with SMI 60Hz eye-tracking glasses and coded with SMI BeGaze software.
conditions lays in the additional instructions provided to the treatment group: “The person you do the shopping for is actually sustainable-oriented and prefer to eat organic food”.

Preliminary results show that the treatment group had a different gaze map than the control group. In other words, consumers who search for green products take a different look at the information presented to them. The choice process of green products is divided into 3 stages: orientation, evaluation and verification. Each visual heuristic—price tags, labels, text or images and servicescape—plays a different role in each stage of the green choice process.

Discussion

The results of both studies show that green consumers use the information displayed in-store and on product packaging at a different stage in the choice process of green products. As such, providing the relevant information to the green consumers enable a choice process in accordance with environmental concern, and thus closing the Green Gap.