



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Intern. J. of Research in Marketing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijresmar

Replication

The paradox of ‘green to be seen’: Green high-status shoppers excessively use (branded) shopping bags

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

First received on August 14, 2015 and was under review for 2½ months

Available online 17 December 2015

Replication Editor: Eric T. Bradlow

Keywords:

Sustainability
Evolutionary theory
Status
Green marketing
Shopping bags

ABSTRACT

This research conceptually replicates, in a real-world setting, prior lab findings showing that status motives make people publicly display sustainable behavior. The results show that shoppers of a high-status sustainable grocery chain display sustainable shopping more by using branded shopping bags than shoppers of a lower-status chain. Extending previous findings, we demonstrate the non-sustainable costs of acting sustainably for status reasons: high-status “green” shoppers are more likely to buy new bags rather than bring their own.

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1. Introduction

Acquiring social status (hereafter referred to as ‘status’) is an innate human motive due to its evolved advantages, as it is associated with higher ranking within the hierarchy, greater resource entitlement, and sexual opportunity (Kenrick, Griskevicius, Neuberg, & Schaller, 2010). Status can be attained by control of economic resources, political or military power, legitimate authority, or by having valued skills or knowledge (Colarelli & Dettmann, 2003). In addition, and counterintuitively, people can gain status by acting altruistically: a behavior that benefits others but is costly to oneself (Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006).

One way to become most altruistic is by displaying sustainable behavior: “Going green to be seen” (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). The reason is that acting sustainably requires individual costs (heightened expense or changing habits) and at the same time benefits the collective interest (reducing pollution or conserving nature). Accordingly, Griskevicius et al. showed in three lab experiments that activating status motives led to increased sustainable behavior. Their participants choose green products over more luxurious non-green products, especially when shopping in public. Hence, people use sustainable behavior as a costly signal, showing their willingness and ability to incur costs for others’ benefit, but at the same time increase their own reputation.

The current research conceptually replicates the findings of Griskevicius et al. (2010) in a field study. We replicate the findings of the original paper at the construct level, showing that status motives can lead to the public display of sustainable behavior, by using different operationalizations of the independent and dependent variables (Lynch, Bradlow, Huber & Lehmann, 2016). In the original paper, participants (all students) were assigned to either a control or a status condition, public signaling was operationalized by manipulating either a public or a private setting, and sustainable behavior – the dependent variable – was measured

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by participants' choice of green vs. non-green (luxury) goods. In the current study all participants are shoppers of sustainable grocery stores (are "assigned" to buying green goods), with status motives being inherent to the stores (chain A being a high-status chain and chain B a lower-status chain), and public signaling of sustainable behavior via the usage of chain-branded bags is measured as the dependent variable.

In line with the findings of Griskevicius et al. (2010), we show that people who are shopping at a high-status sustainable grocery chain are more likely to purposely demonstrate their sustainable shopping behavior by using the shopping bags displaying the name of the chain (branded bags), than people shopping at a lower-status sustainable grocery chain. However, extending Griskevicius et al.'s findings, we show the downside of acting sustainably for status reasons. Specifically, high-status grocery chain shoppers—being particularly concerned about publicly demonstrating their sustainable behavior—buy more branded shopping bags rather than bringing their own reusable bags. This wasteful behavior for purpose of displaying status has obvious negative environmental consequences, such as enhancing pollution, carbon emission, and waste. Hence, within this study we test the paradox of "going green to be seen."

2. Study

2.1. Sustainable grocery chains

In the Netherlands there are two sustainable grocery chains that generally sell the same products at similar prices. In a pre-test ($N = 53$), both chains were rated on a 5-point Likert scale as equally good for the environment ("Shopping at chain A/B is good for the environment") and as having products of similar quality ("At chain A/B they sell high quality products"), all $ps \geq .408$. However, chain A was viewed as attracting more status-oriented shoppers as opposed to chain B. Specifically, participants indicated that shoppers of chain A shop at the sustainable grocery store to display their status more than shoppers of chain B, $F(1, 51) = 10.41, p = .002$, part. $\eta^2 = .170$, $M_{\text{ChainA}} = 3.40$ ($SD = 0.82$) and $M_{\text{ChainB}} = 2.61$ ($SD = 0.96$). This is evident in the way products are displayed (ostentatious vs. modest), the store's design (trendy vs. moderate), and its atmosphere (formal vs. informal).

2.2. Shopping bags

The reusable branded shopping bags (see Appendix A) of both chains were pre-tested on their attractiveness, quality, and usefulness. No differences were found between the two bags, all $ps \geq .436$. In both chains the bags cost 25 Euro cents and are located on the cashier desk.

2.3. Procedure and sample

Within four different stores in Amsterdam (two of each chain) we coded shoppers' usage of a branded bag of the sustainable grocery chain. Specifically, the stores of chain A and B were located within walking distance (approximately 350 yards) from one another in a shopper-intensive area in Amsterdam West and Amsterdam Zuid. A trained research assistant (blind to the purpose of the research), standing beside the cashier desk, recorded whether shoppers bought a new branded bag or brought their own bag (either a branded bag or another reusable bag) during eight observational counterbalanced periods across mornings (10:00–12:00) and afternoons (15:00–17:00). The behavior of all shoppers across the four stores during the observational periods was recorded: 205 in chain A and 205 in chain B (overall $N = 410$).

2.4. Results

A comparison of the shoppers across the two chains showed that a higher proportion of the shoppers of chain A, the high-status chain, bought new branded bags from the store during their shopping trip (21.0%) than shoppers of chain B, the lower-status chain (2.0%), $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 36.55, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .299$. Furthermore, the above finding is complemented by the fact that 13.2% of chain A's shoppers brought a branded bag associated with the chain from home (reused branded bag), whereas only 3.4% of chain B's shoppers brought such a bag, $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 12.83, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .177$. Other type of bags were brought from home by 65.9% of chain A's shoppers and by 94.6% of chain B's shoppers, $\chi^2(1, N = 410) = 53.56, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .361$. Fig. 1 depicts the usage of branded bags (new and reused) from the sustainable grocery chains and the usage of other bags.

3. Conclusion

The current field study replicated the findings of Griskevicius et al. (2010) in a real-world shopping context, showing that status leads people to signal their sustainable behavior. Shoppers shopping at a high-status sustainable grocery chain used more shopping bags displaying the name of the chain than shoppers of a lower-status sustainable chain. In doing so, it demonstrates that the behavior in hypothetical lab situations from the original paper does represent a behavior that exists in "noisy" situations and thereby provides external validity to previous findings and generalize them. Importantly however, the current results add to previous findings by showing the environmental costs of using sustainable behavior as a costly signal. In comparison to shoppers of the lower-status

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