



## Going green: How different advertising appeals impact green consumption behavior<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This research explores how abstract appeal (i.e., describing the features of green products in a more vague way) and concrete appeal (i.e., describing the features of green products in a more specific way) can encourage consumers to engage in green consumption behavior, such as purchasing green products. Across three experiments, this research tests the prediction that abstract (concrete) appeal is more effective in generating green purchase intentions than concrete (abstract) appeal in situations where the benefit association of green products is other (self). Public self-awareness and identity salience moderate the effect of appeal type and benefit association on green purchase intentions. In particular, when green products associate with the benefit of other, abstract appeal is more effective, whereas both abstract and concrete appeals are less effective when green products associate with the benefit of self. This effect is moderated by public self-awareness and whether a collective level of self or an individual level of self is made salient. The results provide important managerial implications for marketers who seek to promote green consumption by suggesting that rather than merely depending on the types of advertising appeals, marketers should modify their advertising message to match the benefit association of the products and to consider the situations where public self-awareness and identity salience are present.

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### 1. Introduction

The growing concern about the sustainability of the natural environment is transforming the competitive pattern of contemporary markets and prompting corporations to think in a “greener” way (Grinstein & Nisan, 2009; Peattie & Peattie, 2009). Many business organizations have started to approach the issue from a strategic perspective and to introduce new brands and products that embrace positive social and environmental outcomes (Grigore, 2011; Leonidou, Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Hultman, 2011). However, convincing consumers to act in a sustainable manner seems to be a very difficult task (Costanzo, Archer, Aronson, & Pettigrew, 1986; Luchs, G., Naylor, Julie, & Raghunathan, 2010), in part because the main beneficiary of green consumption is not always the consumer him or herself but rather other consumers or the society as a whole (Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012). In addition, green products are often priced higher than traditional products, making consumers reluctant to accept the green products (Consumer reports, 2007). Even when consumers display a desirable attitude toward green products and report that they

are willing to purchase green products, very few of them actually do so. Tesla Motor's weak performance in global sales is a very good illustration. With its aim to protect the environment, Tesla Motor is a firm that designs, manufactures and sells electric automobiles. While seeking to speed up production and expand globally, Tesla finished 2014 as an automaker with only 22,477 cars sold—a number that was far below its expectation of 35,000 (Automotive News, 2014). The poor performance in sales inflicted a net loss of 108 million dollars on Tesla (BBC, 2015), which placed considerable pressure on the company's future. Therefore, how to encourage consumers to behave in a sustainable way has become an important issue for both marketers and decision-makers.

Prior research explores consumers' motivation for buying green products but mostly from a consumer-level point of view (e.g., Bickart & Ruth, 2012; Griskevicius, Van den Bergh, & Tybur, 2010; Lee, 2008; Sheehan & Atkinson, 2012; Stern, 2000). For example, Stern (2000) and Lee (2008) find that educational background and age can influence consumers' green consumption behavior. Sheehan and Atkinson (2012) also show that consumers' involvement in environmental issues is of great significance in consumers' choice of green products. Much research has also been focused on the power of egoism in influencing consumers' green purchasing behavior, indicating that consumers are more likely to purchase green products that serve self-interest (Bickart & Ruth, 2012).

When encouraging consumers to engage in sustainable behaviors, marketers often capitalize on the persuasive power of advertising appeals (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008), and sustainable products are always promoted through advertisements using different

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appeals. One commonly used appeal is the abstract appeal. This type of appeal contains unspecific or ambiguous wording and describes the features of sustainable products in a more vague or subjective way. Another commonly used appeal is the concrete appeal, which, in contrast, includes rich information with detailed and tangible clues and always depicts the characteristics of sustainable products in a more specific or objective way (Leonidou et al., 2011). Examples of abstract appeals include this product is: environmentally friendly, clean, and has less pollution, whereas an example of concrete appeal is: our new organic drinking contains 35% natural materials and 15% less plastic in its bottle packaging. A big difference compared to the previous version.

However, although green advertising appeals have long been the focus of much research (Green & Peloza, 2014; White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011; White & Simpson, 2013), the effects of abstract and concrete appeals on green consumption behavior have been rarely probed. Which advertising appeal can most effectively convince consumers to engage in sustainable consumption? Why do we observe nearly equal use of abstract and concrete appeals in green advertising despite the results of prior research that abstract appeal might be less influential than concrete appeal in affecting consumers' response to advertisements (Darley & Smith, 1993; Ford, Smith, & Swasy, 1990; Ogilvy, 1983)? Should marketers change the wordings of their advertisements and use more detailed and concrete language? Prior research has barely answered these questions.

Thus, the current research seeks to answer these questions by examining the effectiveness of abstract and concrete appeals in motivating consumers' green consumption behavior. The study introduces a key variable that may influence the efficacy of abstract and concrete appeals in influencing green consumption behavior: benefit association. By examining specific appeal types, the study also investigates the moderating roles of public self-awareness and identity salience on the effectiveness of advertising appeals. In the following sections, the literature related to green consumption, advertising appeals, benefit association, public self-awareness and identity salience is presented. Research hypotheses are developed. The study describes in detail three experiments examining the impact of advertising appeals on green purchase intentions under different benefit associations (study 1) as well as the moderating roles of public self-awareness and identity salience on such an effect (study 2 and study 3). The last section covers the discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Conceptual development and hypotheses

### 2.1. Green consumption and advertising appeals

Green consumption, as Pieters (1991) defines, is consumption activity that satisfies human needs or wants with minimal detrimental impact on the natural environment. Prior research has investigated consumers' responses to green consumption across a wide variety of products and services, such as energy-efficient automobiles (Green & Peloza, 2014), eco-friendly containers (Kronrod et al., 2012), and gasoline products (Davis, 1994). Despite the fact that consumers' demographic characteristics and general attitudes are important predictors of their sustainable consumption behaviors (Sheehan & Atkinson, 2012; Stern, 2000), prior research indicates that using different types of advertising appeals can also significantly affect consumers' attitudes and behavior toward sustainable consumption (Kronrod et al., 2012; Obermiller, 1995; White et al., 2011; White & Simpson, 2013). For example, Kronrod et al. (2012) examine the role of assertive appeal across various environmental contexts, including economizing water, reducing air pollution and recycling plastic containers, and find that appeal efficacy depends on the perceived importance of the issue at hand. Specifically, when consumers perceive sustainable consumption as important, they respond better to assertive appeal, whereas when sustainable consumption is viewed as unimportant, consumers respond negatively to assertive appeal. In addition, White et al. (2011) explore

how gain and loss appeals can encourage consumers to engage in sustainable behavior such as recycling, and find that the effectiveness of the appeal type relies on whether a particular mind-set is activated. These findings suggest that the execution of advertising appeals is of vital importance to the success of green consumption.

In practice, marketers always use two types of advertising appeals (i.e., abstract and concrete appeals) to motivate consumers' green consumption behavior. We define abstract appeal as advertising appeal that contains vague wording and describes the features of sustainable products in a more abstract and unspecific way, and concrete appeal as advertising appeal that includes detailed and rich information and describes the features of sustainable products in a more concrete and specific way (Leonidou et al., 2011).

The presence of these two types of advertising appeals in practice is intriguing because existing research strongly suggests that concrete appeal is typically more influential than abstract appeal in affecting consumers' responses to advertising. Ogilvy (1983) contends that advertisements with specific and detailed messages are more credible and more memorable than those with messages based on abstractness. In addition, Ford et al. (1990) indicate that consumers are less suspicious of objective than subjective advertising appeals. Similarly, Darley and Smith (1993) also find that compared to subjective appeals, objective appeals with concrete description of product characteristics produce more favorable perception of brand attitudes and thus more favorable purchase intentions. This background leads us to raise specific questions with respect to the effectiveness of abstract and concrete appeal in the context of sustainable consumption.

### 2.2. Benefits associate with sustainable consumption

Strikingly, green consumption associates with one of two benefits frequently. One is the benefit of other, which highlights that the main beneficiary of green consumption is some other individual or the society at large. Another is the benefit of self, which highlights that the main beneficiary is the consumer (Fisher, Vandenbosch, & Antia, 2008; Green & Peloza, 2014; Peloza, White, & Shang, 2013). Some researchers contend that green consumption is most likely to happen when green products associate with the benefit of other. Webb, Mohr, and Harris (2008) posit that socially responsible consumption is invariably socially oriented other than self-centered. Prior research finds that when purchasing environmentally friendly products, consumers always focus on the good of the environment instead of individual interest (Davis, 1994). They may even give up personal profit if the purchase of green products benefits the society (Griskevicius, Van den Bergh, & Tybur, 2010). Further to this point, Peattie and Crane (2005) indicate that green consumption that offers future benefits to the entire generation of consumers is of greater efficiency than green consumption that only provides individual benefits in generating consumers' green purchase intentions. These findings suggest that environmentally friendly consumption is more likely to occur when such consumption associates with the benefit of other.

In contrast, other researchers argue that providing the benefit of self is more appropriate for encouraging green consumption behaviors. This body of research holds the notion that most pro-environmental behaviors are based on egoistic consideration (De Groot & Steg, 2008; Stern, 2000). For example, Holmes, Miller, and Lemer (2002) show that consumers are more inclined to participate in pro-social actions when a form of benefit to the self follows the request for help. In addition, Peattie (2001) notes that highlighting cost-saving often prompts consumers to behave in consumption that generates environmental or social welfare. Consistent with these findings, Luchs et al. (2010) also find that in the process of green consumption, if consumers' personal profit is damaged, they will generate a sense of resistance toward the product, thus influencing their product choice. Therefore, providing the benefit of self is a strong incentive for green consumption that has little to do with social goodness.

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