



Consumers' green involvement and the persuasive effects of emotional versus functional ads



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ABSTRACT

This study compares the effects of four types of ads: a functional green ad promoting the environmental advantages of a product, an emotional green ad using a visual representation of pleasant natural scenery, a mixed type green ad using functional and emotional strategies, and a control group. Findings of an experimental study using a representative sample of U.S. consumers suggest that both the emotional and the mixed-type ads significantly affect brand attitude, mediated by attitude toward the ad. These effects do not depend on consumers' green involvement. Functional ads, in contrast, only impact brand attitudes when involvement, measured as green purchase behavior or green product attitudes, is high.

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1. Introduction

A growing number of consumers are becoming concerned about environmental degradation, waning natural resources, or threats associated with climate change over the last decades (Dunlap & Scarce, 1991; Eurobarometer, 2011). Parallel to this trend, the use of environmental appeals in advertising is very popular among practitioners and marketers (Easterling, Kenworthy, & Nemzoff, 1996; Schmidt & Donsbach, 2012). Especially in the early days of green marketing, companies were quick to adopt green claims, sometimes using delusive or exaggerated environmental appeals resulting in "greenwashing" (Gaski & Etzel, 1986; Kangun, Carlson, & Grove, 1991). In recent years, however, green claims have become more substantial and less ambiguous, which "expresses a more responsible approach to green advertising" (Leonidou, Leonidou, Palihawadana, & Hultman, 2011, p. 24). Nonetheless, critics on green marketing are still cautious about various forms of greenwashing and their impact on growing confusion and cynicism among consumers (Dahl, 2010; Peattie & Crane, 2005). Given this ambivalent nature of green advertising, it is crucial to understand how consumers respond to it. In today's green advertising, Hartmann, Ibáñez, and Sainz (2005) distinguish three major appeals:

a functional appeal, an emotional appeal, and a combination of the two. Functional appeals use arguments about environmental friendly product attributes or production processes. Emotional appeals, in contrast, merely rely on visual representations of pleasant natural scenery. Combined appeals use both functional and emotional strategies in one ad.

Despite the practical relevance and widespread occurrence of functional, emotional and combined green ads, knowledge about their distinct effects remains scarce. The literature displays three research gaps. First, although the currently available body of knowledge suggests that all three types of green ads exert a significant impact on brand and advertising evaluations (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009; Hartmann et al., 2005), no single study sufficiently tests their independent effects. Studies either compare a control group with an emotional (or functional) appeal (e.g., Davis, 1994; Grimmer & Woolley, 2012; Newman, Howlett, Burton, Kozup, & Heintz, 2012; Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995; Searles, 2010; Spack, Board, Crighton, Kostka, & Ivory, 2012), or they use a mix of emotional and functional appeals and check whether such an ad is more persuasive than a non-green ad (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009; Hartmann et al., 2005). Second, based on dual-process models such as the Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1990), the effectiveness of emotional versus functional appeals should depend on consumers' green involvement. However, previous research ignores the moderating role of green involvement. Third, a lion's share of prior research relies on student or convenience samples (e.g., Grimmer & Woolley, 2012; Newman et al., 2012; Hartmann et al., 2005; Searles, 2010; Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995; Spack et al., 2012; but see Grimmer & Bingham, 2013; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009). Since green consumerism significantly varies

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by age, education, and gender (Roberts, 1996), student samples lack population validity.

The present study attempts to fill these research gaps by investigating the distinct and combined effects of emotional versus functional green advertising appeals. Furthermore, this study systematically tests the moderating roles of several interrelated green involvement dimensions. These dimensions are environmental concern, green purchase intentions, and attitudes toward green products. The analysis also controls for the impact of key demographic characteristics by using a quota sample of U.S. consumers.

2. Functional versus emotional green ads

Although scholars and marketers agree that green positioning is an essential factor in the market success of products and services, still research devotes minimal attention to the question of how the design of green claims affects the processing of the message and its effectiveness (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2009). Positioning a brand as a “green brand” entails an active communication of its environmentally sound attributes (Hartmann et al., 2005). According to classification schemes of generic positioning strategies (Aaker, 1996), brand positioning uses functional attributes and/or by emotional benefits. A green positioning strategy based on functional attributes should communicate the relevant environmental advantages of the product compared to competing conventional products. Such advantages may include, for example, environmentally friendly production processes, product use, or product elimination. The aim of this positioning strategy is to build brand associations by delivering information on environmentally relevant utilitarian product attributes (Hartmann et al., 2005). Studies confirm that environmentally sound product arguments can affect purchase intentions (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2009; see also Roberts, 1996).

Emotional brand advertising, in contrast, aims to transfer affective responses to the brand (Edell & Burke, 1987). Searles (2010) finds that verbal cues based on enthusiasm appeals reinforce an individual's positive attitude toward efforts to protect the environment and positively influence participants' pro-environmental views. Anxiety appeals induce anti-environmental attitudes. However, verbal cues are not the only way to evoke emotional responses. Chowdhury, Olsen, and Pracejus (2008) show that a single dominant positive image might be sufficient to engender significantly positive affective responses. In the case of green advertising, visual representation of pleasant nature scenery may have this effect, based on the principle that both contact with nature itself and exposure to nature images generate positive emotions (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Stokols, 1990).

However, only a few studies deal with the question of whether functional attributes or emotional appeals exert a stronger effect on brand attitudes. Among the most notable of these studies is a series of experiments by Hartmann and colleagues. Hartmann et al. (2005) address this question in an experimental field study with 160 university students. The authors design a functional positioning strategy, an emotional positioning strategy, and a combined strategy for a hypothetical car brand. In the functional experimental condition, the ad gives detailed information on how emissions are reduced. The image is identical to the one of the control group and has no emotional connotations. The emotional positioning ad uses pleasant nature imagery without cues about functional product attributes. The third condition combines both strategies. This ad includes the same image as the second condition, but mentions only a reduced number of environmentally utilitarian attributes. A conventional ad serves as control condition. The findings of this study suggest that “a combined strategy, which appeals to both environmental consciousness and emotional benefits, will yield a stronger attitudinal effect than either functional or emotional positioning strategies on their own” (p. 21).

In a later study, Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2009) find that nature imagery may also enhance the positive influence of informational appeals on consumers' attitude towards a brand. A national survey

with a representative sample of 360 participants employs three experimental conditions: a non-environmental ad, an environmental ad providing information on the environmental features of the brand, and a nature ad which combines the environmental features with a visual design to evoke nature experiences. Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2009) find that the association of a green brand with pleasant nature imagery in addition to the presentation of information on specific environmental product features leads to more positive brand attitudes, as compared to the effect of informational claims alone. According to the authors, pleasant nature imagery leads to the association of specific emotional experiences with the brand that are to some extent comparable to those consumers' experience through contact with nature. Interestingly, depictions of landscapes with lush green vegetation and clear water elicit more favorable emotional responses than other landscapes or urban scenes, regardless of the natural environment in which individuals live (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2012).

The evidence from these studies suggests that all three positioning strategies exert positive overall influences on brand attitude. So far however, no study compares the three positioning strategies simultaneously. In Hartmann et al.'s (2005) first study, the combined condition contains only a reduced number of informational appeals. As a consequence, the design does not allow to accurately separate the three appeals. Strictly speaking, the combined condition is not the sum of the functional and the emotional conditions. Also, the student sample warrants replication with a broader sample. Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2009), in contrast, do not use a student sample. In this study, one condition combines the information about the environmental features of the brand with pleasant nature scenery. However, the study does not include a condition to test the sole effect of pleasant nature scenery on brand attitude. Therefore, a study that simultaneously examines the impact of all three positioning strategies seems warranted. Furthermore, since the ads employ (functional) arguments versus (emotional) heuristic cues, environmental involvement may moderate the effect of these positioning strategies.

3. Environmental involvement

A wealth of research suggests that consumers differ in how they respond to persuasive appeals. One key variable to explain this response is consumers' level of involvement. Involvement refers to the degree to which a person perceives an attitude object as personally relevant (Petty & Cacioppo, 1990). As the Elaboration-Likelihood Model (ELM, Petty & Cacioppo, 1990) suggests, highly involved individuals are motivated to process information that leads to message elaboration. For these people, arguments about the attitude object should exert more influence on their opinions than emotional appeals. In contrast, less involved consumers may rely on heuristic cues such as emotions or feelings to form their opinions.

In the context of environmental advertising, high involvement consumers process the arguments displayed in an advertisement. The evaluation of a brand thus depends on the functional green arguments. Low involvement consumers are not motivated to process those arguments. For these people, emotional appeals such as beautiful nature scenery should serve as a heuristic cue guiding attitude formation. However, involvement is a rather fuzzy concept with a myriad of different conceptualizations and operationalizations, not only in advertising research but also in the more general persuasion literature. Regarding green involvement, there are at least three relevant conceptualizations, (1) environmental concern, (2) attitudes toward green products, and (3) green purchase behavior. While these facets of environmental involvement are related, they can have different antecedents and outcomes. Therefore, research on the moderating effect of involvement on green advertising effectiveness should take all three facets into account.

A lion's share of studies defines involved green consumers as those who are highly concerned about the environment (D'Souza & Taghian,

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