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Short Communication

## Social desirability does not underpin the eco-label effect on product judgments

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### ABSTRACT

What reason underpins why people say they prefer eco-labeled over conventional products during direct perceptual comparison? One possibility is that there is no difference in the perceptual experience of the products; the participants just say there is because they wish to gain other's approval. In this paper, we tested this social desirability account of the eco-label effect by requesting participants to judge grapes that were in truth identical but labeled "eco-friendly" and "conventional" respectively. The eco-label effects were similar in magnitude for an impression management condition (participants were told that their responses were monitored) and a no-instructions control condition, but greater in a moral-instructions condition (the participants were told, among other things, that conventional agriculture is harmful). The experiment suggests that people do not say that they prefer eco-labeled products because they seek other's approval. Social motives may underpin reasons to purchase "green" products at the grocery store, but social motives are not the direct cause of the eco-label effect on the perceptual experience of the products and product judgments.

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### 1. Introduction

Labels such as "organic" and "Fair Trade" not only function as markers that attract conscious consumers into more sustainable purchase behavior (Didier & Lucie, 2008; Yiridoe, Bonti-Ankomah, & Martin, 2005); they also seem to have psychological consequences. In general, framing and extrinsic/label information tends to enhance product evaluations when the labels appeal to the person making the evaluations (for a review, see Piqueras-Fiszman & Spence, 2015). For example, chocolate claimed to be "Fair Trade" is perceived as healthier (Schuldt, Muller, & Schwarz, 2012) and tastier (Lotz, Christandl, & Fetchenhauer, 2013) than identical chocolate claimed to be "conventional" (non-labeled). These placebo-like findings, emerging as a result of people's mindset rather than an actual difference between the products compared, are often called halo effects (e.g., Schuldt et al., 2012).

People also prefer the taste of coffee (Sörqvist et al., 2013), wine (Wiedmann, Hennigs, Behrens, & Klarmann, 2014), potato chips (Lee, Shimizu, Kniffin, & Wansink, 2013) and several other products (Sörqvist, Haga, Langeborg, et al., 2015) they believe are "eco-

friendly" over the taste of "conventional" alternatives, even if the products labeled "eco-friendly" and the products labeled "conventional" are actually identical. This specific example of a halo effect, associated with a preference bias for environmentally friendly products, is called *the eco-label effect* (Sörqvist et al., 2013) and its magnitude depends on pro-environmental attitudes (Lee et al., 2013) and environmental concern (Sörqvist, Haga, Holmgren, & Hansla, 2015). As such, the eco-label effect can be a practical tool for testing the effects of environment-related attitudes and preconceptions on behavioral outcomes in the laboratory. Although this phenomenon appears to be easily replicated and reliable, its psychological antecedents are still unclear. For example, as people may be motivated to purchase eco-labeled goods for selfish reasons (Thøgersen, 2011), such as to impress others and gain positive reputation (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010), the eco-label effect may reflect socially desirable responding rather than reflecting the participants' true views. In this paper, we make novel use of an experimental technique in a bid to test whether people say they prefer eco-friendly products because they seek other people's approval.

To clarify what we intend to refer to by the use of the term "social desirability", it is useful to briefly mention Paulhus (1984) two factor theory of socially desirable responding. According to this theory, socially desirable responding can be subdivided into two

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types of responding: self-deceptive positivity and impression management. Impression management concerns conscious deception of others with regard to self-presentation by socially desirable overt behaviors and attitudes, and correlates positively with lie measures. Self-deceptive positivity, on the other hand, concerns a nonconscious deception of oneself, reflecting overly positive self-presentations, and correlates positively with defense and coping measures. In this paper, we are primarily concerned with the impression management component of socially desirable responding because the aim here is to test whether the intention to impress others underpin why people say they prefer an eco-labeled product. Moreover, it is this form of socially desirable responding that is at work when consumers purchase eco-labeled products as a mean by which to impress others and gain their liking (cf. [Griskevicius et al., 2010](#)).

The relationship between environmental attitudes and ecological behavior is typically weak ([Bamberg, 2003](#); [Grob, 1995](#)), which, at least in part, might be attributable to a bias to respond in socially desirable ways ([Ewert & Baker, 2001](#)). Since the majority of measures of environmental behavior and attitudes are self-reports, environmental issues should be highly affected by concerns of social desirability ([Milfont, 2009](#)). In the context of the eco-label effect, one reason why people tend to report a preference for eco-friendly consumables (and other objects) may be that they deceptively try to give others the impression that they hold attitudes that are socially approved. The impression management hypothesis of the eco-label effect has been addressed previously with both experimental ([Sörqvist et al., 2013](#)) and correlational ([Sörqvist, Haga, Holmgren, et al., 2015](#); [Sörqvist, Haga, Langeborg, et al., 2015](#)) techniques. In the experimental study, the participants were requested to taste two cups of coffee—one called “eco-friendly” and one called “conventional”—and to report taste and willingness-to-pay estimates. To manipulate the participants’ concern with social desirability (and hence the need for impression management), half were asked to report the estimates to the researcher instead of noting the responses themselves on the response sheet (high concerns with social desirability condition). The other half reported their responses anonymously (low concerns with social desirability condition). The eco-label effect was just as strong in the condition with low concerns for social desirability, suggesting that the reason why people demonstrate a bias towards eco-labeled products is not because they seek other people’s approval when making the estimates. Correlational studies, attempting to find relations between the magnitude of the eco-label effect and individual differences in tendencies to act in socially desirable ways, are consistent with this conclusion ([Sörqvist, Haga, Holmgren, et al., 2015](#); [Sörqvist, Haga, Langeborg, et al., 2015](#)). It seems, therefore, that labeling and framing information influences actual sensory experiences ([Litt & Shiv, 2012](#); [Woods et al., 2011](#)) rather than promoting response biases. Yet, participants may still be considering other’s approval when making the estimates even if this does not show in the decision data. The influence from social desirability processes—in particular the acts of impression management and attempts to deceive others—may be more easily detected by other dependent variables, such as response times. Under conditions of high concern with social desirability (e.g., when the participants are told that their responses are monitored and their behavior and person evaluated), people take longer to respond due to the cost associated with impression management ([Holtgraves, 2004](#)).

The purpose of the current experiment was to test the impression management hypothesis of the eco-label effect. To this end, we borrowed a technique from [Holtgraves \(2004\)](#) wherein the participants were told that their responses were being monitored by others (an impression management instructions condition), and the effects of this manipulation is measured by response time anal-

yses. If impression management is a driving mechanism underpinning the eco-label effect, the magnitude of the effect should be larger in the impression management instructions condition in comparison with a no-instructions control condition. In particular, the response times should be longer in the impression management instructions condition because of the cost associated with managing the impression (cf. [Holtgraves, 2004](#)). Conversely, evidence against a social desirability account would be obtained if no difference between these two conditions is revealed. As evidence against the social desirability account would rest on a null-hypothesis, we also included a moral-instructions control condition. Here, the participants were told that conventional agriculture often involves pesticides that are harmful to workers and nature, and that consumers therefore have a responsibility to purchase eco-labeled products in the grocery stores. This control condition served several purposes. If the magnitude of the eco-label effect is larger in this condition, as we hypothesized, then it would be difficult to defend the social desirability account in view of the absence of a difference between the no-instruction control condition and the impression management condition. An enhancement of the eco-label effect in the moral-instructions control condition would show (a) that the power of the experiment is great enough to detect a difference between conditions, (b) that the participants did indeed read and respond to the instructions, and (c) that the magnitude of the eco-label effect is indeed possible to influence by mere instructions.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 105 students (72 females, 33 males) at the University of Gävle with a mean age of 24 years were recruited to participate in the experiment. They all received a small honorarium for participation.

### 2.2. Grapes

Sugraone seedless grapes from Italy were used as the to-be-eaten and evaluated product. All grapes used in the experiment were conventional, but some of them were called “eco-friendly”.

### 2.3. Design and procedure

The participants were alone in a laboratory room during the experiment proper, with the experimenter waiting outside. They sat at a desk in front of a laptop computer. The participant’s first task was to eat two grapes. The two grapes, taken from the same container, were presented to the participants in plastic mugs that were placed on the desk in front of the participant. Each of the two mugs contained one grape. The participants were told verbally which grape was “conventional” and which grape was “eco-friendly” and, to avoid any uncertainty, the words “conventional” and “eco-friendly” were also written on notes, placed under each mug respectively, to communicate to the participant which grape was “conventional” and which was “eco-friendly” (although both grapes were actually conventional). Note that products in Sweden, certified for being environmentally friendly, are labeled “Kravmärkt” or “Ekologisk”, which roughly corresponds to “eco-friendly” in English rather than “organic” (see [Klintman & Boström, 2004](#), for an extended discussion), but the meaning of the international label “organic” and the Swedish “eco-friendly” is very similar. Because of this, we use the words “organic” and “eco-friendly” interchangeably in this paper. The order in which

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