

Eco-Friendly Products: Do I Really Know Them?

Sidney Schnor

Fally Masambuka-Kanchewa, Ph.D.

Iowa State University

513 FarmHouse Lane,

Ames,

Iowa, 50010

Telephone: 515-2948943

Sidney24@iastate.edu

Fallymk@iastate.edu

Introduction

Green marketing and greenwashing are popular buzzwords among consumers. The term “green marketing” has grown tenfold from 2000 to 2014 (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Green marketing is a strategy used by firms and companies to provide consumers with information about the product and the company’s environmental practices (Yazdanifard & Mercy, 2011). Green marketing includes using eco-friendly labels to communicate with consumers about eco-friendly practices (FuiYeng, 2015). These eco-labels are used to attract environmentally conscious consumers; however, not all companies that participate in greenwashing follow through with the eco-practices they claim to promote (Montero-Navarro et al., 2021).

Greenwashing is the use of green marketing strategies to deceive the consumer and make them believe that a product is more environmentally friendly than it is (Dahl, 2020; Montero-Navarro et al., 2021). Greenwashed products have led consumers to distrust companies and green product labeling as well as the agriculture industry at large (Dahl, 2010). The growing mistrust between producers and consumers over green marketing and greenwashing has led to increased lawsuits filed against the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (Negowetti, 2015). Absence of a clear definition of “natural” and standardized labelling contributes towards consumers’ confusion (Negowetti, 2015). Greenwashing not only hurts the companies involved in the practice but hurts other honest companies and the agricultural sector. Assessing college-age respondents’ ability to authenticate labels and perceptions on purchasing green-marketed products will assist in identifying ways of educating the public about greenwashing and establishing the authenticity of the product labels, thereby restoring trust and confidence among consumers.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by two theories: competitive altruism and social identity theory. Competitive altruism theory describes how people strive to gain a reputation of being generous (Hardy & Vugt, 2006). People use generosity to elevate their status among their peers (Hardy & Vugt, 2006). Prakash et al., (2019) in their study that was conducted in India, reported that young consumers purchase green-marketed products to prove their generosity and commitment to save the planet. However, there is limited research in the United States focusing on young consumers motivations for purchasing eco-friendly products.

On the other hand, social-identity theory talks about how people strive to improve their self-image by creating associations based on their personal identity or affiliation to a specific group (Tajfe & Turner, 2004). For example, people create groups based on similar interests and purchasing decisions thereby forming in-groups and out-groups (Stets & Burke, 2000). To show their allegiance to the group, people may avoid specific brands or products (Xiao et al., 2022). College-aged students may wish to identify themselves in a particular way as such making them associate themselves with specific behaviors such as purchase and consumption of eco-friendly products. However, their knowledge and perceptions of what these eco-friendly products represent based on the product labels may conflict with what these products represent which may contribute towards distrust of these products.

Purpose and Specific Objectives

The study sought to assess college students’ knowledge and perceptions of eco-friendly products. The specific objectives of the study were to:

- Establish respondents’ ability to decipher authenticity of labels.
- Identify factors influencing purchase of products.

Methods

A quantitative exploratory study was conducted among students at Iowa State University from February to April 2022 through a Qualtrics survey. A total of 49 students responded to the questionnaire. The first question on the questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether they purchased eco-friendly products or not. Half of the respondents indicated purchasing eco-friendly products. All respondents who indicated that they purchased eco-friendly products were included in an experiment where they were asked to group labels into two categories, authentic and inauthentic. In the experiment pictures of five inauthentic (researcher generated) and four authentic (from existing firms) eco-labels were presented to the respondents. The survey also contained questions asking respondents to rank the factors influencing their purchase of eco-friendly products. The data was evaluated using SPSS version 28 where descriptive statistics were run.

Results

The results indicated that most respondents (90.5%) correctly labeled the USDA Organic label as authentic out of the four authentic choices. Most respondents (85.7%) incorrectly identified an inauthentic label as being authentic while a considerable majority failed to decipher the rest of the labels. Price was ranked as number one (44%) factor influencing purchase of eco-friendly products. The least important purchasing factor was peer influence, with 51% choosing it as their last choice. Product label was ranked as the third most important factor, with 24% choosing it as their third choice.

Conclusion

The results revealed that respondents could not distinguish between authentic and inauthentic eco-labels, except for the USDA label. From these results, it can be concluded that consumers may easily fall into greenwashing practices as they are not knowledgeable about authenticity of the eco-friendly labels. Price was ranked as the major factor influencing purchase of eco-friendly products while peer influence was ranked as a least factor. The respondents in this study did not consider their peers' eco-friendly purchase behaviors to decide whether to buy eco-friendly products or not. As such it may be concluded that purchase of eco-friendly products was more about the respondents' personal identity than association with a specific group (Tajfe & Turner, 2004).

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

The USDA Organic label is certified by USDA following a rigorous process based on set standards (McEvoy, 2020). The results support the idea that having a heavily regulated label can protect consumers from deceptive behaviors. It is recommended that Agricultural communicators should work in collaboration with the FDA to educate the public on label identification by providing information through blogs and infographics. An app could be developed by the FDA or a third party to help consumers establish authenticity of eco-labels while shopping. Peer influence was ranked as the lowest factor. These results are contrary to findings from other studies which reported that purchase of eco-friendly products is driven by the desire among people to be associated with a specific group or as a way of proving their generosity (Hardy & Vugt, 2006; Prakash et al., 2019; Tajfe & Turner, 2004). The research implies that more research employing mixed methods design should be conducted to identify factors that influence purchase of eco-friendly products among young people.

References

- Dahl, R. (2010). Green washing. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 118(6).
<https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.118-a246>
- FuiYeng, W., & Yazdanifard, R. (2015). Green marketing: A study of consumers' buying behavior in relation to green products. *Global Journal of Management and Business Research: E Marketing*, 15(5), 16-23.
- Hardy, C., & Van Vugt, M. (2006). Nice guys finish first: The competitive altruism hypothesis. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 32(10), 1402–1413.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167206291006>
- Leonidou, C. N., & Skarmeas, D. (2015). Gray shades of green: Causes and consequences of green skepticism. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 144(2), 401–415.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2829-4>
- McEvoy, P. by M. (2020, December 14). *Organic 101: Five steps to organic certification*. USDA. Retrieved October 10, 2022, from <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2012/10/10/organic-101-five-steps-organic-certification>
- Montero-Navarro, A., González-Torres, T., Rodríguez-Sánchez, J.-L., & Gallego-Losada, R. (2021). A bibliometric analysis of greenwashing research: A closer look at agriculture, <https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-06-2021-0708>
- Negowetti, N. E. (2015). Food Labeling Litigation: Exposing Gaps in the FDA's Resources and Regulatory Authority. *Brookings Institution*, 1–31.
- Prakash, G., Choudhary, S., Kumar, A., Garza-Reyes, J. A., Khan, S. A. R., & Panda, T. K. (2019). Do altruistic and egoistic values influence consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions towards eco-friendly packaged products? An empirical investigation. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 50, 163-169.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2019.05.011>
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870>
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (2004). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In *Political psychology* (pp. 276-293). Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203505984-16>
- Yazdanifard, R., & Mercy, I. E. (2011, June). The impact of green marketing on customer satisfaction and environmental safety. In *2011 International Conference on Computer Communication and Management* 5(1), p. 637-641
- Xiao, Z., Wang, Y., & Guo, D. (2022). Will greenwashing result in brand avoidance? A moderated mediation model. *Sustainability*, 14(12), 7204.