Clarifying, confusing or crooked? How ethically minded consumers interpret green advertising claims

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For today’s ethically minded consumer, everyday consumption choices can be fraught with anxieties and misgivings. Take the morning cup of coffee, for example. Is it made with beans that are shade grown? Is the sugar fair trade? Is the cream organic? Is the travel mug BPA-free? Contemporary consumer culture is increasingly inflected with ethical, and moral concerns, and for the average consumer, it can be a complicated path to navigate.

On the one hand, consumers face a growing number of ethical purchase options. Between 2009 and 2010, the number of “greener” products, or products claiming to be environmentally friendly, increased by 73 percent (TerraChoice, 2011). The global market for organic food has more than doubled since 2002 to $27 billion in 2010, with the U.S. market accounting for almost half that total (Bouckley, 2012; Hunt & Dorfman, 2009). On the other hand, not all of these ethical products are created equal. Store shelves are stocked with products that claim to be ethical – be they “all natural” or “green” – but are actually not much different from conventional products. Sometimes this misinformation is willful, as in greenwashing, or deceptive advertising that paints a conventional product as environmentally friendly when in reality it falls short of established guidelines. Other times, this misinformation can be accidental, as was the case with Whole Foods Market, which felt the wrath of dissatisfied consumers when news reports revealed that food grown in China and labeled organic might not have met the standards for certification (Neuman & Barboza, 2010). Consumer backlash
quickly prompted the self-billed “natural and organic” grocery store to alter its sourcing policies and reduce the number of products it carries from China.

Whether intentional or inadvertent, this marketing misinformation combined with a staggering number of ethical product options helps partly explain why many would-be ethical consumers are unwilling or unable to act. Indeed, one of the biggest issues in the area of ethical consumption is the sizable gap that exists between consumer intentions and consumer behaviors. Called the attitude-behavior gap or word-deed gap, this disconnect describes the all-too-common situation in which self-described conscientious or ethical consumers claim they are willing choose and pay more for ethical products over conventional ones, but fail to follow through with these intentions at the cash register (Bonini, Hintz, & Mendonca, 2008; Kalafatis & Pollard, 1999; Peattie, 2010).

This chapter offers a partial explanation for this gap. In contrast to most research exploring the attitude-behavior gap, I focus on the way consumers interpret and derive meaning from green advertising claims. This is in contrast to the majority of scholarly work looking into this attitude-behavior gap, which focuses on identifying the typical ethical consumer and those antecedent attitudes, values and behaviors that will best predict ethical product purchase (for example: Anderson & Cunningham, 1972; Prothero, 1990; Schlegelmilch, Bohlen, & Diamantopoulos, 1996; Shrum, McCarty, & Lowrey, 1995). Instead, I focus on the ethical frameworks consumers use as they contemplate their morally infused
consumption choices and the complicated and multifaceted ways in which they read and understand green advertising messages. This contributes to much-needed research in the ways advertising influences ethical consumption (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993; Kilbourne, 1995; Manrai, Manrai, Lascu, & Ryans, 1997; Obermiller, 1995).

Specifically, this chapter explores how ethically minded consumers understand and interpret green advertising claims. Based on focus group interviews with 21 self-identified, ethical consumers, the data suggest consumers draw complex interpretations of green advertising claims, including those that could be classified as misleading or “greenwashing.” Rather than viewing green claims as deceptive or self-serving, consumers frame them in much more nuanced ways, balancing the realities of a disengaged mass consumer culture with the idealistic and lofty goals of environmentally friendly consumption. This ambivalence helps explain the well-documented attitude-behavior gap among ethically minded consumers who claim to be motivated by pro-social concerns, such as the environment, but fail to follow through with these concerns in their actual purchases.

This chapter is organized as follows. It begins with a discussion of ethical consumption and ethical consumers. This first section outlines what constitutes ethical consumption, how ethical consumers are defined, and the different ethical approaches that have been used to explain ethical consumption. The second
section considers the marketing side of ethical consumption. It explores how consumers understand corporate ethics, especially as it relates to advertising. Special attention is given to the problem of green advertising, or potentially deceptive advertising about ethical products. The third section offers a case study of a particular green advertisement that could easily be classified as greenwashing or misleading. It first describes how consumers make sense of green advertising in general, then, drawing on focus group data, it details how consumers interpret a particular problematic advertisement for bottled water. The chapter ends with a discussion of managerial implications and directions for future research.

I. Ethical Consumption and Ethical Consumers

After more than three decades of research, ethical consumption and green advertising represent a well-established field of inquiry (for example: Henion & Wilson, 1976; Kilbourne, 1998; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; Kinnear, James, & Sadrudin, 1974; Obermiller, 1995; Peattie, 2010; Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995; Shrum, et al., 1995; Tanner & Kast, 2003), yet there remain a number of undertheorized issues (Crane, 2000; McEachern, 2008). In particular, not enough is known about how consumers interpret and process green advertising (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993) and how consumers perceive the ethical behavior of corporations (Brunk, 2010).
As a category, the term ethical consumer\(^1\) denotes a broad collection of consumption orientations, assumes multiple forms and encompasses a variety of consumer practices, including fair-trade purchasing, community-supported agriculture and ethical investing. It can be informed by a number of motivations, simultaneously individual and private as well as community-oriented and public. It goes by a number of names, including responsible consumption (Fisk, 1973), ecologically concerned consumption (Henion, 1976; Kinnear, Taylor, & Ahmed, 1974), socially responsible consumption (John H. Antil, 1984; John H. Antil & Bennett, 1979), socially conscious consumption (Webster, 1975) and political consumption (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti & Stolle, 2008; Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). Despite the variety in terminology, each one is concerned with the same larger construct, albeit in differing degrees (John H. Antil & Bennett, 1979).

Consistent across all these semantic variations, the concept of ethical consumption incorporates matters of conscience, and can include issues of animal welfare, workers’ rights, localist concerns, health-related matters and environmental issues (Auger & Devinney, 2007; Carrigan, Szmigin, & Wright, 2007). Ethical consumption is not aligned with the voluntary simplicity and downshifting movements. Ethical consumption addresses questions of how to consume; whereas voluntary simplicity and downshifting address the question of whether to consume, and “reject the persona of the consumer” (Clarke, N., Barnett, C., Cloke, P., & Malpass, A. (2007). Globalising the consumer: Doing politics in an ethical register. *Political Geography, 26*(3), 231-249).
2004; Crane, 2001). It involves “the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices due to personal and moral beliefs” (Crane & Matten, 2004). As a practical matter, it tends to include either positive ethical consumerism in the form of boycotting, or deliberately buying products and services that are minimally harmful to people, animals and the environment, and negative ethical consumerism in the form of boycotting, or deliberately avoiding products and services that do not take into account the impact on people, animals and the environment (Smith & Williams, 2011). At its heart, ethical consumption “seeks to embed altruistic, humanitarian, solidaristic and environmental commitments into the rhythms and routines of everyday life – from drinking coffee, to buying clothes, to making the kids’ packed lunch” (Clarke, et al., 2007, p. 233).

Scholarship into ethical consumer behavior has its roots in studies of socially responsible behavior (Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968), which revealed that individuals who score high on the social responsibility scale were more likely to be involved in their communities, not just in conventionally viewed civic ways, such as membership in PTAs, but also in more consumer-oriented ways, such as donating money to charity. This work was extended by Anderson and Cunningham (1972), who identified the typical socially responsible consumer as young, well-educated and of relatively high occupational attainment and socioeconomic status; these consumers are also more cosmopolitan, less
conservative and less status conscious. Based on early studies, the overall picture of the ethical consumer is of a person who feels efficacious, confident and socially integrated. Webster (1975), for example, noted that the socially conscious consumer is well-adjusted to community norms, although not a conformist, and feels capable of influencing the community and wider world. Brooker (1976) showed that socially conscious consumers are more likely to be self-actualizing individuals, concerned with actions that “will satisfy the needs of others at the same time that individual's own needs are satisfied” (p. 107).

The majority of contemporary research has been concerned with developing a typology of ethical consumers and identifying what attitudes, values and behaviors define this group (Crane, 2001; Kilbourne, 1998). Past research suggests ethical consumers are wealthier, better educated and hold white collar jobs (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993) however demographics are rarely found to be consistent, strong predictors of ethical consumer behavior (Belk, Devinney, & Eckhardt, 2005; Shrum, et al., 1995). Instead, attitudes and past behaviors have been found to be more useful. For example, individuals who demonstrate greater perceived consumer efficacy, environmental concern, brand loyalty, information seeking and collective orientation are more likely to shop in ethical ways (Ellen, Wiener, & Cobb-Walgren, 1991; Follows & Jobber, 2000; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; Shrum, et al., 1995).

Still, there remains a lack of powerful factors that can consistently and
reliably predict ethical consumption and explain under what conditions ethically minded consumers are likely to put their wallets where their attitudes are. That is to say, the well-documented attitude-behavior gap among would-be ethical consumers remains insufficiently explained (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010; Kalafatis & Pollard, 1999).

Part of the problem is that models of ethical consumer behavior assume that intention naturally translates into behavior, when in reality, any number of events can transpire to inhibit consumer intention moving on to consumer behavior (Carrington, et al., 2010). In the actual consumption moment, ethically minded consumers may be more influenced by price or product attributes, rather than ethical characteristics (Belk, 1975; Belk, et al., 2005; Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). More generally, consumers may feel a lack of efficacy or belief that their ethical actions could have an impact (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Kalafatis & Pollard, 1999). For others, the desire to make ethical purchases is forestalled by what many perceive to be a lack of credibility and honesty in advertising in general and in environmental claims in particular (Crane, 2000; Hulm, 2010; Leire & Thidell, 2005).

Persuasive and informative mass media exert a strong influence, both positive and negative, on consumers’ likelihood of adopting ethically minded consumption attitudes and of engaging in ethical consumption. This influence can be enduring or momentary. General, on-going media exposure can influence
certain attitudes and beliefs that are conducive to ethical consumption. For example, viewing public affairs and nature documentaries positively predicts environmentally friendly behaviors (Holbert, Kwak, & Shah, 2003) and news consumption has been shown to predict ethical consumption, while entertainment content has not (S. Cho & Krasser, 2011; Shah, McLeod, et al., 2007).

Marketing’s influence is more complicated. Ethical consumers tend to be information seekers but view advertising with a fair degree of skepticism (Shrum, et al., 1995). Interviews with typical consumers suggest marketing information would be viewed positively, especially among those who are less informed, but that they would be more likely to respond to negative information, i.e. information about unethical corporate behavior than positive information (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Advertising, particularly green advertising, is perceived as unreliable and not credible (Johnston, 2008; Kalafatis & Pollard, 1999; Manrai, et al., 1997). Fears of greenwashing, or advertising that includes environmental claims that are trivial misleading, or deceptive, are a concern (Kangun, Carlson, & Grove, 1991). Consumer doubt regarding advertising claims is especially salient with respect to issues of environmental consumption, since so many of these claims fall under the category of credence attributes, i.e., benefits or attributes that cannot be verified through information or personal experience (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970, 1974). When a consumer buys an organic apple, she must trust that the organic label is truthful and that the apple is indeed
organic.

Given the equivocal influence of demographics, attitudes, and mass media on ethical consumption, scholars are increasingly turning to consumers’ ethical orientations as a way to explain the attitude-behavior gap (Carrington, et al., 2010). For example, personal values and ethics have been shown to positively influence ethical consumption in the context of fair trade, and organic and sustainable food (Arvola et al., 2008; Shaw & Clarke, 1999; Shaw & Shui, 2002; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008).

As a lens through which to analyze consumption, ethical orientations offer considerable leverage. Consumption, according to Hall (2011), is an inherently ethical or moral matter. Consumption raises questions of fairness, of weighing individual needs against group interests, of balancing immediate versus delayed gratification. “In this sense, the very negotiations upon which consumption is based – moral concepts such as justice and power, and basic ethical principles of right vs. wrong and good vs. bad – render consumer behavior as an outlet for the expression of personal ethics” (Hall, 2011, p. 627). Early research into the socially conscious consumer reflected this moral component of consumption choices, with those scoring high on the social responsibility scale (used as a proxy for socially conscious consumer orientations) also showing a deep concern for broader ethical and moral issues as well as a strong sense of justice (Anderson & Cunningham, 1972; Berkowitz & Lutterman, 1968).
Yet the influence of personal ethics on consumer choices is complicated (Auger, Burke, Devinney, & Louviere, 2003), as illustrated by the case of child labor. While very few consumers would explicitly condone using child labor in the manufacture of clothing or electronics, for example, the alternative is not necessarily an improvement and sanctions against child labor do not automatically mean children are better off. “I don’t believe that the people who buy Gap and Nike want these girls to work in brothels because they lost their jobs at the garment factory” (AsiaWeek, 2001, quoted in Auger, Burke, Devinney & Louviere, 2003).

As well, ethical consumption choices can have an impact on a consumer’s subsequent ethical beliefs. Mazar and Zhong (2010) have shown that although green consumers are perceived as more altruistic, ethical and cooperative than their non-green counterparts, individuals who purchase green products are more likely to engage in unethical behaviors, such as lying and stealing, than those who do not buy green products. They suggest that the halo effect of green consumerism needs to be taken with reservations. Green consumption choices seem to give these consumers free license to engage in indulgent and unethical behaviors.

In reality, ethical choices are often a result of trade offs and compromises. Consumers balance their interests against others’ interests, taking into account the information they have at hand. As a result, consumers might have multiple,
frequently contradictory opinions about what is the ethically right decision to make (Szmigin, Carrigan, & McEachern, 2009).

Indeed, scholars have identified a number of different ethical frameworks to describe the ways consumers think about and understand their ethical consumption choices. Deontological approaches rely on rules. Consumers evaluate their consumption choices as right or wrong in reference to some higher morals, norms or laws. Within deontological ethics, individuals act ethically because it is the right thing to do, regardless of the outcome. A teleological or consequentialist approach focuses on the outcomes of particular actions, taking into account the probability, desirability and severity of positive or negative impacts (Brunk, 2010). Using the example of sweatshop labor, and ethical consumer motivated by deontological reasoning would view sweatshop labor as universally abhorrent, since it goes against deeply held beliefs about how people should be treated. From the consequentialist perspective, however, sweatshop labor might be viewed as the more desirable outcome, if the alternative means workers would have to seek other, more dangerous work such as prostitution.

Virtue ethics offers a third explanation for why consumers might make ethical purchase choices. Whereas both the deontological and consequentialist perspective both consider self-interest to be an obstacle to altruism and ethical behavior, virtue ethics acknowledges an “enlightened self-interest in caring for others” (Barnett, Cafaro, & Newholm, 2005, p. 17). While consequentialist and
Deontological approaches focus on duties and responsibilities, virtue ethics is concerned with the good life and how to achieve it (Atkinson, forthcoming). The good life here is one that leads to well-being, maximizes moral self-realization and fosters harmonious social relations and intellectual development (Cafaro, 2001). Ethical consumption fits neatly into this view and recognizes that these kinds of consumer choices are “not simply a matter of wholly selfless beneficence” but are a combination of “other-regarding and self-regarding virtues” (Barnett, et al., 2005, p. 14).

Lastly, the social connection model (Young, 2004, 2006) argues that as consumers in a global, interconnected marketplace, we are implicated in the various injustices carried out in the name of production and consumption, such as child labor, environmental degradation, and workers’ rights. As consumers, we are socially connected to other actors in ways that supersede nation-state borders and local in-group affiliations. As such, consumers share a responsibility in not only rectifying these marketplace injustices but also in challenging the underlying structures that make these injustices possible.

Consumers bring their particular ethical perspectives to bear while navigating the marketplace and making decisions about what to buy. Ethically minded consumers who adopt a consequentialist viewpoint, for example, will consider how the un/ethical behaviors of corporations impact various domains, such as workers, the environment or the local community (Brunk, 2010).
However, scholars have found that when consumers bring their ethics to bear on marketplace decisions, they do so inconsistently. For example, consumer attitudes are more likely to be affected by unethical corporate behavior than ethical corporate behavior (Folkes & Kamins, 1999) and consumers are more likely to punish corporations that are being unethical rather than reward those companies that are acting ethically (Elliott & Freeman, 2001).

Consumer ethics can also be affected by mass media, particularly persuasive content. Auger et al. (2003) demonstrated experimentally that consumer perceptions of what is ethically salient can be altered. When subjects were presented with different combinations of functional and ethical product attributes, certain combinations of ethical product attributes, such as animal testing, were more likely to lead to purchase than other combinations, such as biodegradability. It suggests that consumers could be convinced to change their purchase patterns depending on what kind of relevant ethical information is presented (Auger, et al., 2003).

The specifics of this influence, however, are insufficiently understood, and the way in which marketing activity might affect ethical consumer behavior needs greater attention (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). The following section takes up this point.

II. Green Advertising

In their determination of what constitutes an ethical product or service,
consumers are also keenly aware of what kinds of corporate actions are ethical; however, scholars have only begun to explicate how consumers perceive the ethical qualities of corporations (Brunk, 2010). Studies have shown that ethical branding by companies like Ben & Jerry’s and The Body Shop can be received favorably by ethically minded consumers and can translate into commercial success, whereas ethical breaches like that of Shell, for its poor environmental track record, or Nike, for its use of sweatshop labor, can damage brand names and hurt sales (Crane, 2001).

Oftentimes, though, what consumers consider ethical is at odds with what corporations consider ethical. One area where this disconnect is prominent is in the realm of advertising. Corporations, for example, tend to view advertising as one of the least important elements of corporate social responsibility (Perrini, Pogutz, & Tencati, 2006). Consumers are inclined to think the opposite. Relying on in-depth interviews with consumers, Brunk (2010) demonstrated that questionable advertising practices were a core concern. Brunk’s informants believed that advertisers target and take advantage of weak and vulnerable consumers, such as young children and the elderly, and promote misleading, deceptive even false product information. An often-cited example is that of Nestle. Beginning in the late 1970s, Nestle faced severe backlash from consumers when it advertised infant formula in less economically developed countries in Africa and Asia. As a result, Nestle has been the target of a three-decades-plus boycott. It is
important to note that Nestle was not criticized for the product it was selling, which in more developed countries is not as dangerous for infants, so much as for the aggressive marketing tactics it employed (Crane, 2001).

While extreme cases like that of Nestle are more easily interpreted as aggressive and unethical, much less is known about how consumers interpret more mainstream, ethically minded advertising (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). The case study in the next section of this chapter offers insight into this domain. First, the remainder of this section offers a discussion of the kinds of persuasive communication available to ethically minded consumers, focusing on green advertising and the risk of greenwashing.

When it comes to marketing ethical product attributes, manufacturers have a number of options, including advertising, in-store promotions and packaging. Some ethical attributes may also be marketed by way of eco-labels (or certification seals) that indicate the product has met certain guidelines. 2 Regardless of the kind of marketing, consumers tend to be at a disadvantage in that many of these ethical product claims, referred to as credence claims, cannot

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2 EnergyStar is the perhaps the best known eco-label in the United States and is used to indicate the energy efficiency of various appliances, like fridges and washing machines. These labels are frequently incorporated into advertising and packaging. Unlike other industrialized countries, the United States does not have a single, government-endorsed, multi-attribute eco-label similar to the Blue Angel in Germany or the Nordic Swan in Scandinavia. Case, S. (2004). Ecolabels: Making environmental purchases easier, Green Procurement (Vol. 12, pp. 32-36).
be verified by the individual consumer. Instead, they must trust that the claims are truthful. Whereas many product attributes can be verified through personal experience or information search, credence claims must be accepted at face value as truthful (Darby & Karni, 1973; Nelson, 1970, 1974). For example, a consumer buying coffee is able to confirm attributes like taste and price by drinking it (experience) and comparing price (information), but if a particular brand claims to be cultivated using organic farming principles, the consumer has no practical way of verifying such a claim.

Given the near impossibility of consumers to verify credence claims, marketing regarding these kinds of attributes is often viewed more skeptically than are claims about search and experience attributes. Marketing messages for these kinds of claims, then, must be perceived as highly credible and trustworthy to be effective (Ford, Smith, & Swasy, 1990; Grunert, Bech-Larsen, & Bredahl, 2000; Hansen & Kull, 1994; Thøgersen, 2000, 2002). Cultivating trust is important. Consumer trust has been shown to have a powerful impact on marketplace attitudes and behaviors, with a long tradition of scholarly work demonstrating persuasion depends on trust (Boush, Chung-Hyun, Kahle, & Batra, 1993; Hovland & Janis, 1959; McGuire, 1968). Consumer trust leads to greater attention to persuasive messages, more favorable brand attitudes and stronger brand loyalty, whereas lack of trust can negatively impact brand affect and beliefs (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Harris & Goode,
In these moments of consumer uncertainty, trust acts as a lubricant and works as a simplifying strategy for consumers. If consumers trust the brand or the manufacturer, they are more likely to accept the organic claim as credible and honest. When consumers do not trust the content of the marketing claims or suspect an advertising message of deception or green washing, they are much less likely to purchase the product or adopt a favorable attitude toward it (Kangun, et al., 1991; Thøgersen, 2002).

Misjudging how consumers interpret green advertising or understating the importance of consumer trust can be fatal. For example, early green advertising in the 1990s faced a backlash from consumers when green marketing failed to live up to its environmental claims or was used to hawk inferior products (Crane 2000; Prothero 1990). As a result, consumers in the 1990s viewed advertising as the least credible source of environmental information (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993) and a content analysis of advertising in the same time period showed 58 percent of environmental advertising contained at least one misleading or deceptive claim (Kangun, et al., 1991).

Despite the importance of understanding the advertising side of the ethical consumption equation, the majority of attention remains focused on the consumer side and identifying typical ethical consumers (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993; Kilbourne, 1995). A handful of studies have analyzed green advertising messages, taking
either a content analysis approach to document what different kinds of green advertising exists, or an experimental approach to test which advertising frames resonate with consumers. In their content analysis of green print advertising, Iyer and Banerjee (1993) showed that most green appeals focused on promoting an environmentally friendly corporate image and on describing the environmentally friendly steps being taken in the production phase (i.e. careful use of natural resources) rather than the consumption or disposal phases. Experimental studies have explored which kinds of green appeals work best. In tests of environmental claim strength, results show moderate claims regarding pollution reduction are more convincing than weak or strong claims about pollution reduction (Manrai, et al., 1997). Taking into account issue salience, Obermiller (1995) demonstrated experimentally that “sick baby” appeals (negative appeals that focus on the problem and its severity) are more effective than “well baby” appeals (positive appeals that reaffirm the individual’s ability to effect change) for low salience green issues, whereas the opposite is true for high salience green issues.

From a regulatory perspective, government and consumer groups provide guidelines on what constitutes appropriate green advertising and what could be construed as deceptive or misleading. The Federal Trade Commission released its first Green Guide in 1992, then revised it in 1996 and 1998 (FTC, 1998). It is currently undergoing additional revisions to address emerging green claims, such as carbon-offsets, and new technology (FTC, 2010, October 6). These guides
advise manufacturers on a variety of aspects about green advertising, such as
staying away from overstating environmental attributes or including
environmental claims that cannot be substantiated. ³ Consumer and media groups,
like SourceWatch and Greenpeace, offer guides to consumers to help identify
greenwashing. TerraSource, an environmental marketing firm, lists the seven Sins
of Greenwashing (TerraChoice, 2011) that are to be avoided, including the sin of
no proof, the sin of vagueness, and the sin of lesser of two evils.

What remains largely absent from the academic literature, however, is an
understanding of how consumers understand green advertising in a non-
experimental setting, and how green advertising, including so-called
greenwashing, is received by audiences. Content analyses can tell us what kinds
of green advertising exist. Experiments can show us how artificially manipulated
factors can influence consumer responses. But neither provides robust insight into
how consumers understand real-world green advertisements, how these
advertisements are understood as truthful or deceptive, and how consumers weigh
the various competing interests (i.e. price, availability, performance) in their
determination of what makes a suitable green product.

The next section addresses these gaps through a case study analysis of a
green advertisement for bottled water.

³ The full Green Guide can be found at
III. Case Study: Ozarka Natural Spring Water

This section synthesizes the discussion of the previous two sections by exploring how real consumers understand a real advertisement. The advertisement is a magazine advertisement for Ozarka bottled water that relies very heavily on environmental appeals.

Food is a suitable product to use for a case study about ethical advertising, as food is central to the issue of ethical and sustainable consumption (Johnston, 2008). Food cannot be separated from the issue of morals and “moral concern with food intake is as old as morality itself” (Zwart, 2000, p. 113, cited in Buller, 2010). For example, in Western society, it is considered amoral to eat dogs; in the Hebrew faith, there are numerous divine laws regarding what food is admissible and what is not; in the Hindu religion, the cow is a sacred animal. In Western consumer culture, food remains a morally charged category. “We now define ourselves not by what we eat – and perhaps less by what we choose not to eat – but by how we eat” (Buller, 2010, p. 1877). As a consumer commodity, food touches on all potential dimensions of ethical consumption, including issues of localism, organic food production, and fair trade, etc. (Johnston, 2008). It also represents a means for individuals to pass moral judgments on others. In the 1950s, for example, women who used instant coffee were characterized as lazy, spendthrift, inferior housewives (J.H. Antil, 1987). Given the well-established connection between food and ethics, it was deemed an appropriate commodity for
an advertising case analysis.

The Ozarka Natural Spring Water advertisement ran in women’s lifestyle magazines, like Better Homes and Gardens and O, The Oprah Magazine in 2008. Ozarka, which was acquired by Nestle in 1987, bills itself as 100 percent natural, locally sourced spring water. The advertisement discussed here is part of Ozarka’s campaign promoting its new environmentally friendly bottle design. The advertisement features an Ozarka bottle in the center foreground, situated against a pristine nature backdrop featuring a bright blue sky, rolling hills, a wide, slow moving stream, green grass, wildflowers and a setting sun low on the horizon behind some low hanging clouds. The headline reads: “When it comes to the environment, we’re doing less.” Underneath the bottle, the body copy reads: “100% natural spring water deserves an Eco-Shape bottle that has less impact on the earth. Ozarka Natural Spring Water. A little natural does a lot of good.” The reader’s attention is then directed to three aspects of the bottle. The first tag points to the cap and the descriptor “dye-free cap,” the second points to the label and the descriptor “less paper,” while the third points to the body of the bottle and the descriptor “30% less plastic.” The claim of “less paper” refers to the fact that Ozarka’s Eco-Shape label is a third of the size. The claim of “30% less plastic” is in comparison to other half-liter bottles on the market, including those for carbonated beverages, which are heavier to retain the carbonation (Bialik, 2007).

See: http://www.ozarkawater.com/#/about/about_us
The evidence supporting these two claims is found in a footnote at the bottom of the advertisement and is presented in very small font.

TerraChoice’s Sins of Greenwashing (2011) offers a guide to assess the Ozarka ad. The environmental marketing firm lists seven green claims that advertisers should avoid or run the risk of being seen as misleading, deceptive or deceitful. These “sins of greenwashing” list the kinds of claims that marketers might be tempted to make in an effort to present their product or service as more environmentally friendly, but TerraChoice cautions that misappropriating these green claims can backfire on a brand. A close reading of the Ozarka ad suggests the company has committed four of the sins of greenwashing:

- **The Sin of the Hidden Trade Off** is “committed by suggesting a product is “green” based on an unreasonably narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues” (TerraChoice, 2011, p. 9). Here, Ozarka suggests its bottled water is green because of the Eco-Shape bottle, without taking into account the other elements of production (energy use, greenhouse gases, air pollution) that are environmental issues.

- **The Sin of No Proof** is “committed by an environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification” (TerraChoice, 2011, p. 9). Although Ozarka provides evidence for its claims about less plastic and less paper, these claims are relegated to very hard to read fine print in a footnote. As
well, claims about using 30% less plastic are not in reference to Ozarka’s own bottles, or even to other water bottles, but to national averages that include heavier, carbonated beverage bottles.

• The *Sin of Vagueness* is “committed by every claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer” (TerraChoice, 2011, p. 9). The Ozarka ad includes the three-arrowed recycling logo at the bottom right and asks consumers to please recycle. However, it does not mention that in most municipalities, recycling facilities won’t accept bottle caps because they are made of a different plastic material than the bottle (EarthTalk, 2008).

• The *Sin of Lesser of Two Evils* is “committed by claims that may be true within the product category, but that risk distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole” (TerraChoice, 2011, p. 9). Like organic cigarettes or fuel-efficient SUVs, water in a plastic bottle, even if the bottle uses 30% less plastic, is more environmentally problematic than tap water.

Based on TerraChoice’s criteria, the Ozarka ad hits four of seven sins and clearly comes down on the side of greenwashing.

But is it really?

I presented this ad to members of three focus groups, and the real-world
consumer interpretations were both complicated and nuanced. In examining consumer responses to green advertising, this research fills a gap in scholarly work about ethical consumption. With just a few exceptions (Ellen, et al., 1991; Obermiller, 1995; Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995), academics have paid only passing attention to how green advertising’s design and copy affect consumer message processing (Manrai, et al., 1997).

As well, by relying on qualitative techniques, I am able “to explore complex behavior and to experience the consumer’s ‘eye view’ of the world,” an approach that is well suited for preliminary data collection in under-researched areas and topics like this one (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001, p. 567). Unlike survey questions, which can introduce elements of social desirability when discussing ethical behavior (Carrington, et al., 2010), and experiments, which place consumers in highly controlled, artificial situations, focus groups yield rich insight into consumer understandings of ethical consumption and green advertising. Although lacking in generalizability to the broader population, focus groups make up for this with the depth of data they reveal. Compared to depth interviews, the focus group allows respondents to interact which can lead to

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5 These focus groups were part of a larger project looking at green advertising in cross-platform lifestyle programming, (i.e. the web site, magazine and television shows of Oprah, Rachael Ray, Martha Stewart and Better Homes & Gardens) and how these ads were interpreted by real consumers. Focus group members were presented with five advertisements using green appeals. This chapter is limited to a discussion of consumer interpretation of just the Ozarka ad.
deeper discussions than might be had during individual contributions (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

The focus groups in this project consisted of three groups of seven women each. Consumers were between the ages of 30 and 62 (average as was 42.9), were the primary shoppers in their households and regularly watched or read lifestyle programming, like Oprah Winfrey or Martha Stewart. Participants need not have been ethical consumers, although the vast majority identified as such when asked. Like most consumers, these participants were skeptical of advertising and business (Bonini, McKillop, & Mendonca, 2007). Similar to other findings (Webb & Mohr, 1998), these consumers were skeptical and expressed concern that they, as consumers, were being taken advantage of and that advertising about ethical or prosocial product attributes was a gimmick. At best, advertising is viewed by these women as inherently biased and self-serving; at worst, patently misleading and deceptive:

Advertising is out there so that you will choose their product as opposed to someone else’s product. If you really don’t have all of the information, it’s like anything else, people are going to put out so much to make their product more appealing, and who knows the more important information that they could be holding that will maybe help make a determining factor. They put out stuff that’s to their advantage with regards to a lot of what they’re trying to sell.
One of my main concerns with green products is greenwashing. I just want it to be very upfront you know, as far as what it is. And sometimes I feel like I have to go out of my way to do additional research because it’s not always exactly what it may claim to be, and the way that it’s packaged may not always exactly be that. (P5, FG1)

And I’m just going to throw out that all of that seems really deceptive to me. I mean, anybody can do that. There aren’t a lot of standards around it yet. So that’s why I rely more on a website like Grist⁶, because it gives me more information on the carbon footprint of the companies that are producing things, because looking at the packaging just doesn’t give me enough information. (P7, FG2)

These consumers were also aware that some green claims, like being organic or “natural,” were nothing more than marketing gimmicks. For many of them, a primary concern with green advertising was greenwashing.

It was like ok this is a gimmick. Everybody’s doing this, and just putting it on there. So yeah, you could end up being like that, like all right you’re green now too. Are you really or are you just

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⁶ Grist.org is a web site of environmental news and commentary
trying to sell? (P7, FG2)

Yeah, it's vogue right now. Being green is vogue right now. So every company is going to try to have their...you know, even if they've been doing the same thing for 40 years, they're going to try to find a way to let you know that it's green. (P6, FG3)

These participants, then, displayed a distrust of advertising broadly and skepticism about green advertising in particular that mirrors consumers in general (Kanter, 2009). It is surprising, then, to hear their interpretation of the Ozarka ad.

Initial reactions to the water bottle ad were as expected. Participants were skeptical and critical about the product and the green framing of the message. Participants echoed the sentiment of TerraChoice’s Sin of Lesser of Two Evils (2011) and wished consumers would opt for reusable bottles that could be refilled with tap water rather than disposable, one-shot plastic bottles. One informant said, “It’s kind of a joke to me…30% less plastic, but it’s still plastic and it’s still…where are you going to put all these bottles?” (P3, FG2).

But in all three focus groups, the discussion became more complicated and, unprompted by the moderator, participants began weighing the various factors at play in a consumer’s mind and started talking about the positive aspects of the ad. This turn in the conversation, which happened in all three focus groups, reveals two main themes that help rationalize and justify why consumers, despite their best ethical intentions, choose not to buy ethical products in the marketplace.
The first theme argued for the idea that consumers have to make personal trade-offs. Purchase decisions must reflect not only the individual consumer’s wishes, but also the realities of the consumption situation and the demands of other family members. One participant mentioned that the tap water in her rental house tasted horrible. If she owned the house she’d buy a water filter, but as a renter, she felt her only option was to buy bottled water.

Two other informants mentioned that for households with children, having bottled water at hand was much healthier than soda or juice. Another participant said that because Ozarka is locally sourced, it represents a positive ethical attribute that should be kept in mind. Being local means being healthier and less processed.

It just looks refreshing, just coming from the spring, and it’s an actual natural spring in Texas and really good water. You don’t have to process it a lot, so…and coming from an environmental background, I know there’s a ton of processes going on. (P7/FG1)

The second rationalization offered by participants was the idea that, while bottled water may not be ideal, at least this Ozarka brand is a step in the right direction with its Eco-Shape bottle. Buying bottled water can be rationalized as the right choice because consumers are supporting a company that is making an effort at reducing plastic waste.

People do buy it, so if people are going to continue to buy it,
they’re going to continue to make it. So if they’re going to make it more environmentally friendly, then that’s good. (P2/FG1)

I mean, for me, I look at it and think, well, a lot of people drink bottled water. They say reuse, recycle, but sometimes people just don’t. And if you can at least make it a little bit better so that people can do it, then great. I mean, standing ovation for that. (P7/FG1)

It will make them feel better about it. It’s better than the alternative. (P4/FG3)

Ultimately, participants presented a conflicted story in response to the Ozarka ad. It was recognized as greenwashing and as an ethical product of dubious character. But it was also justified as an appropriate purchase, given the trade-offs consumer are forced to make. It may not be ideal, but participants can rationalize it as making the best of a bad situation.

The reality of it is we can’t always…we have really busy lives, and we can try as hard as we can to do everything as natural as possible, but the reality of it is, we don’t all live on farms and we don’t…I mean, we’re living in a metropolitan city, most of the people have one or both parents working, and it’s just a reality of the situation and at some point you have to say look, I’ve done the best I can, so I do think this is better than the other alternatives. (P6/FG3)
The results suggest consumers are complicated and oftentimes contradictory in their assessment of green advertising and ethical products. It underscores work done by Crane (2001), who has argued that the idea of an ethical product is a fallacy. Rather than classifying individual products as ethical or unethical, it is better to think of them as bundles of ethical attributes that relate to any number of ethical issues. Following this logic, there can be no such thing as an ethical product, only ethical attributes. Even these ethical attributes represent just one aspect of the product. Consumers are still motivated by other factors, such as price and performance, and will often find themselves in the situation of having to choose one attribute over another. For the focus group participants, then, the Ozarka water bottle occupied a middle ground between ethical and unethical. It offered some ethical attributes (less plastic, a dye-free cap) that helped justify purchasing it over competing but less ethical brands.

Similarly, the work by Kilbourne (1995) helps explain why participants were not uniformly put out by the Ozarka ad as an example of greenwashing. Kilbourne has argued that green advertising can be situated on a continuum, from ecological to environmental. On the ecological end, advertising could be described as Green (with a big ‘G’) whereas on the environmental end, advertising could be described as green advertising (with a little ‘g’). On the one hand, Green/ecological advertising is more robust and represents a challenge to the dominant social paradigm. It advocates a reformist or radical approach,
including an eco-centric (rather than anthropocentric) perspective. On the other hand, green/environmental advertising is concerned with promoting the status quo. Environmental solutions are seen to rest with consumption, science and technology. In this view nature is a resource to be managed by humans. Following this logic, we might fairly position the Ozarka ad at the green/environmental end of the continuum. It addresses an environmental issue, but does so in a way that seeks to maintain the status quo: resolving the environmental crisis requires consuming, albeit consuming differently. Participants seemed to recognize this advertising appeal as a form of acceptable, although weak, green advertising.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The insights from these focus groups suggest consumers are very nuanced in their assessments of green advertising. While an ad may be read objectively and in isolation as greenwashing, consumers interpret the message with a rich and changing mental calculus. This complex dynamic helps explain why individuals may claim to hold environmental values and to be green consumers, but their actual marketplace choices are not always in keeping with those attitudes. In actuality, the distance between a consumer’s green attitudes and their green purchases is fraught with the pressures of day-to-day reality such that, as past research into the green attitude-behavior gap suggests, consumers may talk the green talk, but frequently fail to walk the green walk.

The data in this study suggest there is a complicated process of
rationalization and justification happening to prevent green intentions from manifesting as green behaviors. While research has focused on identifying the presence of this gap, very little research has sought to chart the dimensions of the gap itself. That is to say, the failure of green attitudes to result in green purchases has been well documented, but what is missing from the literature is an empirical focus on the various consumer orientations that, in the moment, prevent otherwise green individuals from enacting their green values in the marketplace. I propose a model of ethical consumption that outlines this process and suggests avenues of future research that would help delineate the contours of this gap.

Drawing on the O-S-O-R model of social psychology (Markus & Zajone, 1985) and political communication (McLeod, Kosicki, & McLeod, 2002), I suggest that ethical consumer behavior can better be understood by examining individual consumer orientations *in combination* with messages about green consumption, particularly green advertising. Most research looking at the attitude-behavior gap assumes a stimulus-response process and adopts one of two guiding perspectives. One approach examines the stimulus (which can be anything from green marketing appeals and word of mouth to in-store product availability) to understand what kinds of green appeals work best (Hansen & Kull, 1994; Iyer & Banerjee, 1993; Kilbourne, 1995; Manrai, et al., 1997; Obermiller, 1995; Schuhwerk & Lefkoff-Hagius, 1995). A second approach looks to the various pre-existing consumer orientations that can inhibit or encourage green consumption,
such as perceived consumer efficacy, trust, need for information, and environmental concern (Ellen, et al., 1991; Gupta & Ogden, 2009; Kalafatis & Pollard, 1999; Peattie, 2010; Schlegelmilch, et al., 1996; Shrum, et al., 1995).

Rarely are these two influences studied in tandem to understand how they interact to engender subsequent consumer orientations, which in turn influence green purchase decisions. The O-S-O-R model from social psychology offers a framework to understand this process and suggests the effects of media messages, like green advertising, are likely to be conditional rather than powerful and direct. The first O in the model stands for pre-existing consumer orientations, “the set of structural, cultural, cognitive and motivational characteristics” of the audience members who are presented with a mediated message (McLeod, et al., 2002, p. 238). These predispositions are essentially individual differences and vary from consumer to consumer. The communication message, represented by the S, encompasses those messages that inform consumers about green consumption choices and could range from persuasive or information mass mediated content to interpersonal or electronic word of mouth. Individuals may respond to the message in various ways, and these subsequent orientations, represented by the second O, influence how consumers are likely to react or respond, signified by the R.

Essentially, the model argues that communication, such as a green advertising message, has conditional effects on individuals, effects that are
mediated by the individual’s pre-existing orientations. It recognizes that individuals bring their unique set of cognitive, affective and motivational characteristics to the processing of any media message. This basic model and its extensions have been applied successfully to gauge the influence of political media content, such as news or advertising, on civic and political participation (J. Cho et al., 2009; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah, Cho, et al., 2007; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001). Although most work has been done in the area of political communication, the model has been extended in very limited ways to other areas, including environmental concern and political consumption (Shah, McLeod, et al., 2007; Zhao, 2012).

As outlined in Figure 1, the O-S-O-R model can be fruitfully applied to the area of ethical consumption where it could offer useful, more robust insight into the attitude-behavior gap. Although by no means exhaustive, the model identifies some possible predispositions, communication sources and outcome orientations that could be useful to explore. Specifically, the second O in the model represents the various outcome orientations that might pre-empt consumers’ green concerns from manifesting as green purchases. For example, consumer predispositions, such as ethical beliefs or environmental concern, could moderate the influence of interpersonal communication about a particular green brand on a consumer’s feeling of efficacy, which in turn influences their decision to purchase the green brand.
To put it in anecdotal terms, imagine a new mother who is deciding what brand of diapers to use with her newborn. She is concerned about the environmental impact of using disposable diapers and believes it is her ethical obligation to be a good steward of the environment. She might log on to an online social group and support network for new mothers in her city, where she comes across comments about cloth diapering. The majority of mothers on the discussion board advocates using cloth diapers and describes how simple and straightforward they are to use, in addition to being vastly superior to disposable diapers in terms of their impact on the environment. Our hypothetical new mother may follow these comments closely and notice that the majority of mothers choose cloth diapers. She may interpret these comments to indicate that social norms within her group behoove her to make the same choice.

The focus group data described previously also exemplify these interactive effects of predispositions and communication content on outcome orientations, which in turn affect ethical consumption. Informants framed their own day-to-day consumption choices in ethical terms and described themselves as ethical consumers. When interpreting a particular example of green advertising, the majority saw it as greenwashing, as gimmicky and as a hypocritical marketing appeal that was out to dupe consumers. Yet these same individuals also reacted to these ads by rationalizing the environmentally unfriendly act of buying bottled water. Their outcome orientations (O2), as an interaction of ethical beliefs and
marketing content, influenced their perceived efficacy. They rationalized the decision to buy bottled water as a lesser-of-two evils decision. While the task of being an ethical consumer in all decisions is untenable, they can still feel effective as quasi-ethical consumers by making these compromise purchases, i.e. by buying bottled water that comes in more environmentally friendly packaging.

The O-S-O-R model in figure 1 outlines this process of influence, highlighting how predispositions and messages can interact to precipitate additional orientations, which in turn influence behavior choices. This model offers leverage in the study of green consumption by offering explanations for how green intentions are (or are not) translated into green behaviors, with the second O in particular, shedding light on the missteps that can happen in the gap between attitude and behavior.
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Figure 1

Predispositions and Orientations ($O_1$)

- Demographics
  - Values
    - Materialism
    - Altruism
- Attitudes
  - Environmental concern
  - Market mavenism
  - Opinion leadership
  - Risk taking
- Knowledge
  - Environmental
  - Product
  - Marketplace
  - Advertising
- Ethical beliefs

Stimulus

- Marketing
  - Advertising
  - Promotions
  - Packaging
- News
  - Niche
  - General
- Entertainment
  - Celebrity endorsement
  - Movies
  - Music
- Interpersonal communication
  - Discussion
  - eWOM

Outcome Orientations ($O_2$)

- Interpersonal discussion
- Consumer efficacy
- Social norms
- Perceived ease
  - Convenience
- Willingness to Pay
- Skepticism
  - Advertising
  - Brand
- Information seeking

Response

- Behavioral
  - Ethical purchase choice
- Attitude
  - Brand loyalty
  - Product attitude