"I Drink It Anyway and I Know I Shouldn’t": Understanding Green Consumers’ Positive Evaluations of Norm-violating Non-green Products and Misleading Green Advertising

Lucy Atkinson & Yoojung Kim

Consumers increasingly report concern for the environment and acceptance of green products, but few opt for them in stores. This mixed-methods study adds context and helps specify the details of this attitude–behavior gap. First, a preliminary study relies on framing theory to conduct an exploratory content analysis of green advertising frames in four cross-platform women’s lifestyle programming (website, magazine, and TV shows). Data indicate green-ad frames are commonplace in beauty, food, and household products advertisements, but claims are ambiguous and unsubstantiated. Drawing on theories of motivated reasoning, evolutionary psychology and the Persuasion Knowledge Model, the main study incorporates data from focus group interviews to understand how green consumers rationalize their non-green attitudes and positive evaluations of environmentally inferior products. Although consumers are skeptical of these green ads, they are ultimately accepting of the claims and rationalize their norm-violating positive evaluations in ways that amplify the non-green claims.

Keywords: green advertising; motivated reasoning; Persuasion Knowledge Model; framing; attitude–behavior gap; neutralization

Introduction

Although green advertising has been around for decades, the inclusion of environmentally friendly features and attributes as a persuasive selling point is witnessing
a resurgence. A growing number of consumers report a willingness to opt for environmentally friendly products and services while corporations are eager to brand themselves as green and environmentally responsible (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009, 2010; Iyer & Banerjee, 1993). For example, the US organic food market grew by almost 10% in 2011 to reach $31.5 billion in sales (Organic Trade Association, 2012). Despite this growth, there remains a disconnect between consumers’ green attitudes and their green behaviors (Izberk-Bilgin, 2010; Kalafatis, Pollard, East, & Tsogas, 1999). Although consumers increasingly purport to be concerned about the environment and state a willingness to pay more for environmentally responsible products, few actually opt for these kinds of products in the market. For example, while the organic food market is growing, it still accounts for just 4.2% of overall food sales in the USA (Organic Trade Association, 2012). This green gap between attitudes and behaviors is a complicated dynamic and is said to reflect, in part, a lack of trust in environmental claims made in advertising and a lack of confidence among consumers that their green purchases can make a difference.

The two-part, mixed-methods study outlined here seeks to clarify the green gap. We look specifically at the context of green advertising and how consumers respond to these persuasive environmental messages. Focusing on self-identified green consumers, we explore how these environmentally concerned individuals understand their non-green consumption choices and their motives for preferring environmentally inferior products and services. To explore this dynamic, we draw on framing theory and an exploratory content analysis that looks at the prevalence and frames of green advertising appeals in four different cross-platform lifestyle programs, i.e., the website, magazine, and television shows of Oprah, Rachael Ray, Martha Stewart and Better Homes & Gardens. Second, relying on the theoretical perspectives of evolutionary psychology, motivated reasoning, and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), we investigate how individuals interpret these advertisements and understand their own green consumption motives through a series of focus groups with female green consumers who regularly attend to this lifestyle programming content.

**Literature Review: Green Consumption and the Green Gap**

Green consumption represents an increasingly popular form of consumption and is heralded by many as an influential set of choices individuals can make to help resolve the environmental crisis and to help mitigate the effects of climate change (Corbett, 2005; Ockwell, Whitmarsh, & O’Neill, 2009). Reducing energy consumption and choosing organic food are touted as ways individuals can help reduce greenhouse gasses and pollution (Ockwell et al., 2009). The market has responded with an array of green product offerings. Although environmentally friendly products have been available for decades, the current market is witnessing an upswing in available products and services. In 2010, the number of “greener” products jumped 73% compared to the previous year, which itself had seen a jump of 79% from 2008 (TerraChoice, 2011).
Despite the availability of green products, motivating individuals to adopt these kinds of environmentally friendly purchases is challenging. A majority of consumers say they are concerned about the environment and would be willing to pay a premium for sustainable products and services, yet only a small percentage follow through on these environmental concerns when making purchases (Kalafatis et al., 1999). To explain this discrepancy, academics have focused on a number of areas. Considerable attention has been paid to developing a typology of green consumers, identifying those who not only talk the green talk, but walk the green walk (Bennett & Williams, 2011; Kilbourne, 1998). Although demographics are inconsistent, weak predictors, past research suggests green consumers are wealthier, better educated, and tend to hold white-collar jobs (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993; Shrum, McCarty, & Lowrey, 1995). Better predictors can be found in attitudes, values, and past behaviors. Individuals who demonstrate greater perceived consumer efficacy, environmental concern, information seeking, brand loyalty, altruism, and collective orientation are more likely to buy sustainably (Ellen, Wiener, & Cobb-Walgren, 1991; Kilbourne & Beckmann, 1998; Shrum et al., 1995).

Still, explicating the green gap is not just a matter of understanding the predictors of green consumption and assuming that non-green consumption is simply the opposite. As work in environmental psychology demonstrated, intentions to act pro-environmentally are not orthogonal to intentions not to act pro-environmentally (Richetin, Conner, & Perugini, 2011). Instead, the two are dependent on different though not necessarily opposite goals involving different self-regulation strategies (de Boer, Boersema, & Aiking, 2009). The role of motivation underscores the complex and often contradictory reasons behind green consumer choices. When individuals choose to buy organic food, for example, they can be motivated by a number of different reasons, some of which are focused on broader public goods, some of which are focused on private benefits (Atkinson, 2012).

In evolutionary psychology, research on competitive altruism and costly signaling reinforce this complexity (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010; Mitchell & Ramey, 2011). A green consumer, for example, might choose ecologically friendly products not only because they are better for people and the environment but also because it indicates that the individual cares and is altruistic. This is especially true of those green purchases that are publically visible and on display. In addition to garnering social status, green consumers are able to signal their wealth and ability to incur costs, since many green products are higher priced or of reduced quality and efficacy (Griskevicius et al., 2010). Competitive altruism and costly signaling become salient depending on how green products are described and promoted. In a series of experiments, Griskevicius et al. (2010) demonstrated that when green products were promoted as less luxurious, more expensive, and more publicly visible than their non-green counterparts, status-motivated consumers were more likely to choose the green alternative. Absent messages communicating these green benefits, consumers are less likely to opt for the green product.
Green consumption choices can also be understood against the backdrop of motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning refers to individuals’ tendency to process information in biased ways, reinforcing their predispositions (Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Kunda, 1990; Paharia, Vohs, & Deshpandé, 2013). When presented with information, individuals tend to arrive at conclusions that are favorable and will search for justifications to rationalize as ethical those behaviors that are not (Eckhardt, Belk, & Devinney, 2010). In the case of consumer behavior, motivated reasoning can result in rationalizations that allow ethically minded consumers to condone unethical business practices, like sweatshop labor, when it involves desirable products (Paharia et al., 2013). The rationalizations people make for non-preferred, norm-violating consumer behaviors tend to fall into one of five categories, or neutralization techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of victim, condemning the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties (Chatzidakis, Hibbert, & Smith, 2007; Grove, Vitell, & Strutton, 1989; Strutton, Vitell, & Pelton, 1994; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

In addition to rationalizing away unethical choices, motivated reasoning can exacerbate non-preferred behavior choices, resulting in boomerang effects, whereby a communicated message has the opposite effect of its intended outcome. For example, public service announcements aimed at reducing littering, smoking, and energy consumption have been shown to have the unintended effect of increasing these behaviors (Reich & Robertson, 1979; Wolburg, 2006). These unintended consequences might result when individuals are presented with messages and in the course of processing them, other salient constructs, such as identity, are also activated (Byrne & Hart, 2009). In their study of political ideology and green consumption, Gromet, Kunreuther, and Larrick (2013) demonstrated that conservatives were less likely to purchase a more expensive energy-efficient light bulb when it was labeled with an environmental message than when it was unlabeled.

This paper focuses on how self-identified green consumers rationalize their non-green consumption choices, which we conceptualize as two distinct forms of non-green behavior: first, choosing to buy products or services that are environmentally inferior, and second, choosing not to buy products or services that are environmentally superior. We focus on female green consumers, since past research indicates women tend to be more concerned about the environment (McCright, 2010). In addition, we explore this dynamic from the specific perspective of green consumer reactions to green advertising messages. While other studies have explored how consumers rationalize their non-green consumption choices (for example, Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Eckhardt et al., 2010), they take a broad perspective. This study concentrates on the specific role that green advertising plays in green consumption motives. The way green products and services are communicated to potential consumers is an important aspect of green consumption, and individuals will respond differently depending on how green advertising messages are framed.

The PKM offers a theoretical framework to understand this. The PKM posits that over time individuals develop personal knowledge about the tactics and goals used in persuasive attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Individuals draw on this knowledge...
when faced with persuasive situations and must “cope,” i.e., respond, to these marketing overtures (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008; Friestad & Wright, 1994). With respect to advertising, past research has demonstrated that attitudes toward advertising in general are low. Advertising, particularly green advertising, tends to be perceived as unreliable and lacking credibility (Johnston, 2008; Kalafatis et al., 1999) and fears of misleading and deceptive green advertising (often called green-washing) are a concern (Kangun, Carlson, & Grove, 1991). These concerns are pronounced among green consumers, many of whom are not only information seekers but are also very skeptical of advertising (Shrum et al., 1995).

In studies of PKM, the activation of persuasion knowledge is generally assumed to be negative, with consumers viewed as defensive actors trying to resist and minimize the effects of advertising messages (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). Although consumer responses other than resistance are rarely considered, a growing body of work has demonstrated that individuals are not always defensive toward persuasive attempts, but might also seek them out as a means of satisfying personal goals, such as finding out information (Kirmani & Campbell, 2004). Our study takes this agnostic approach and assumes that consumer responses to persuasive attempts can be both receptive and resistant.

We draw on data collected from a series of focus groups with self-identified green consumers. The interviews centered on green advertising, particularly deceptive or misleading green claims, and the ways in which participants understood their motives for engaging (and not engaging) in different kinds of green consumption. To ground the study, we began with an exploratory content analysis of green advertising claims, the results of which were used to inform the focus groups.

Preliminary Study: Environmental Frames in Green Advertising

*Green advertising*

Green advertising refers to “promotional messages that may appeal to the needs and desires of environmentally concerned consumers” (Zinkhan & Carlson, 1995, p. 1). Past research indicates that the volume of green advertising has increased (Gephart, Emenike, & Bretz, 2011; Grillo, Tokarczyk, & Hansen, 2008) and that the way the environmental claims have been framed has changed over time. Framing theory with respect to mass communication refers to the way certain elements of a message are selected and highlighted at the expense of other elements of a message (Entman, 1993). A frame calls attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, providing a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143). In the case of green advertising, the way environmental claims are framed influences how consumers choose to engage in green consumption (Holzer, 2006).

Content analyses of green advertising reveals print and TV ads tended to rely on frames that emphasize an environmentally friendly corporate image rather than product attributes or consumer benefits (Banerjee, Gulas, & Iyer, 1995; Iyer &
Banerjee, 1993). In addition, the ads tend to rely on superficial appeals, claims that incorporated bland statements about a product’s green attributes without any meaningful supporting evidence (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993). Other studies have highlighted the deceptive potential of green advertising. Carlson, Grove, and Kangun (1993) demonstrated that more than half the green ad claims were vague and ambiguous at best, outright deceptive, and misleading at worst. Contemporary content analyses have shown that green advertising continues to be plagued by misleading claims (Baum, 2012; Plec & Pettenger, 2012) and that regardless of the credibility of these claims they serve as cues for consumers’ purchase decisions (Spack, Board, Crighton, Kostka, & Ivory, 2012).

In addition to the way environmental claims are framed, green advertising also relies on a number of different executional elements or factors (Rossiter, 2012) to convey environmental associations. Past research has identified the role of nature and nature imagery in green advertising and the positive emotional responses that result (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2009, 2010). This “nature-as-backdrop” approach makes implicit connections between the natural world and the product being advertised (Corbett, 2006). Humans are said to have a generalized affinity for the environment, and this connection with nature, even via “virtual nature experiences,” is a motive for environmentally responsible behaviors (Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2008). These emotional appeals in advertising represent a purposeful effort by advertisers to foster low-involvement, quick associations in the minds of consumers. In contrast to other forms of promotion, including product packaging and in-store promotions, these emotional advertising appeals are more commonly used when the focus is on the consumer rather than the product’s attributes (Banerjee et al., 1995).

Another way advertising can convey green claims and offer assurances to consumers is to incorporate an eco-seal or certification label, such as the Fair Trade labels on food products or Forest Stewardship Council labels on wood and lumber products. Eco-seals in advertising are another kind of executional device that can signal an endorsement of the product’s green attributes, thereby increasing consumer trust in the green claims and belief in the environmental efficacy of the product (Thøgersen, 2002).

**Method**

**Sample**

The purpose of this exploratory content analysis was to examine the kinds of environmental frames used in green advertisements in cross-platform (i.e., magazine, television, and website) lifestyle programming targeted at women. This category was chosen because it includes advertisements for fast-moving consumer goods (i.e., non-durable products like household, health and beauty, and food categories), those product categories in which green advertising is more common and are a central feature of women’s publications (Bergès-Sennou, Bontems, & Rèquillart, 2004; Smith, 2010). Four content providers (Oprah, Martha Stewart, Rachael Ray, and Better
Homes & Gardens) were chosen because they represent this category and have a strong national presence in print, broadcast, and online (see Table 1). Although there are women’s magazines with higher circulation figures, none is associated with both television and online channels. Incorporating these online channels better reflects the media diet typical of the digital age.

Table 1. Advertising sample frame.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magazine</th>
<th>Better Homes &amp; Gardens</th>
<th>Oprah</th>
<th>Martha Stewart Living</th>
<th>Everyday with Rachael Ray</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation</td>
<td>7.6 million</td>
<td>2.4 million</td>
<td>2 million</td>
<td>1.8 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>bg.com</td>
<td>oprah.com</td>
<td>marthastewart.com.com</td>
<td>rachaelray.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV show</td>
<td>Better</td>
<td>Oprah</td>
<td>Martha Stewart Show</td>
<td>Rachael Ray Show</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Association of Magazine Media (2009).

*Average total paid and verified circulation for top 100 ABC magazines.

Magazine, TV, and online ads were selected from each outlet for March 2010. Although not an apples-to-apples comparison, in that only one issue of each magazine was published compared to 23 weekdays of TV and web content, it provides a valid look at green advertising content available during a fixed, equivalent timeframe. For magazine ads, two-, single-, and half-page advertisements were each counted as a single ad. Advertisements smaller than half a page and classified advertisements were excluded. A total of 30 green advertisements were obtained. For television programming, the four shows ran each weekday, yielding a total of 92 hours of programming with 172 green ads. The online content of the four websites was downloaded on the same 23 weekdays as the broadcast content. For each site, the homepage and the primary pages of any secondary content levels were captured using screengrab software. A total of 874 web pages were captured (184 for bg.com; 253 for marthastewart.com; 230 for oprah.com; and 207 for rachaelray.com) with 117 green ads. Any ads on these pages that were self-referential and promoted the website’s corporate media brand (for example, on the oprah.com homepage, there were several ads for Oprah’s television show, for her newsletter and for her network, OWN) were excluded.

**Coding procedure**

From the total collection of print, broadcast, and online collection ads, only those that were considered green advertising were coded. An ad was determined to be green if it conformed with Banerjee et al.’s (1995, p. 22) widely used definition of green advertising and met one or more of the following criteria: “1) Explicitly or implicitly addresses the relationship between a product/service and the biophysical environment; 2) Promotes a green lifestyle with or without highlighting a product/service; 3)
Presents a corporate image of environmental responsibility." Each green ad was coded for company name, media source, date, and product category.

To examine the characteristics of green advertising, the researchers sought to examine how the green ad claims were framed and the various executional elements used. As a discovery procedure regarding green advertising frames, the researchers drew on the traditions of Altheide’s (1987) ethnographic content analysis and Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) constant comparison method. This reflexive process of analysis and interpretation allowed the patterns in the data to emerge without any preconceived expectations or hypotheses (Iyer & Banerjee, 1993). The researchers conducted a content assessment with a different month of magazine ads collected. For this, each ad was assigned to a main promotional theme that best represented the green frame that was emphasized. These patterns were triangulated with previous studies analyzing green advertising claims (Ahern, Bortree, & Smith, 2013; Banerjee et al., 1995; Carlson et al., 1993), and four different dominant ad frames were identified:

1. Promotion of superficial natural image: i.e., inclusion of symbolic but unregulated and unverified claims such as “green choice,” “100% natural”
2. Promotion of green attributes of product: e.g., this product is biodegradable or process of product (e.g., the raw materials used in producing this good are recycled)
3. Promotion of green consumer behavior: e.g., bring your own shopping bags to the store
4. Promotion of green company image: e.g., we are committed to reducing global warming

In addition to environmental claims, different types of executional elements were also coded based on the use of green color in the brand logo or name (i.e., green color, pictures or names of animals and plants), the use of green color in visuals (i.e., green color in background), and the use of “eco-labels” in the ads (i.e., certification of green products or service).

**Intercoder reliability**

After the researchers developed the coding instrument, three undergraduate students who were trained to code the magazine and TV ads performed the coding of the ads in spring 2010. The two authors coded the web ads. Intercoder reliability was calculated based on Perreault and Leigh’s formula (1989) and ranged from 0.90 to 1.0.

**Results**

In terms of product category (see Table 2), the most frequently advertised products were food and beverages (40%, \( n = 126 \)), household, lawn and garden...
supply (18.7%, n = 59), and cosmetic and personal care products (16.5%, n = 52). The results suggest that about three quarters of green advertising (76.2%, n = 237) is accounted for by fast-moving consumer goods like household products and food.

In terms of frames and executional elements (see Table 3), the results show promotion of superficial natural image (71.5%, n = 228) is the most frequently used frame, followed by promotion of green product attributes or processes (24.5%, n = 78), promotion of green consumer behavior (1.9%, n = 6), and promotion of green company image (2.2%, n = 7). In other words, almost three quarters of green ads relied on ambiguous environmental claims, such as “environmentally friendly” or “100% natural.” In executing the green ads, the findings reveal that more than half (59.2%, n = 189) of green ads included the color green or natural imagery in their design while fewer (13.8%, n = 44) used green color in the company’s logo or brand name. Finally, only a fraction of ads (1%, n = 3) used an eco-label, or an award or certification that indicates a product meets specified environmental performance criteria or standards.

The results indicate that green advertising tends to rely on superficial frames emphasizing vague, unsubstantiated claims about the product, referred to as “cheap talk,” or nonbinding claims about product quality (Cason & Gangadharan, 2002). These weak claims are buttressed by various executional devices that rely on consumer heuristics to reinforce the apparent “greenness” of the product. Rarely are more credible cues, like eco-labels, incorporated in green advertising. But how are these ads received by consumers? How do green consumers understand and act on these environmental frames in green advertising? The second study seeks to answer those questions.

Table 2. Frequency of green ads by product category in magazine, TV, and website.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Category</th>
<th>Magazines</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Web</th>
<th>All green ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frequency (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and beverages</td>
<td>17 (56.7)</td>
<td>81 (47.1)</td>
<td>28 (23.9)</td>
<td>126 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosmetics and personal care</td>
<td>2 (6.7)</td>
<td>45 (26.2)</td>
<td>5 (4.3)</td>
<td>52 (16.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household and garden supplies</td>
<td>5 (16.7)</td>
<td>4 (2.3)</td>
<td>50 (42.7)</td>
<td>59 (18.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit organizations (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, UNICEF)</td>
<td>1 (3.3)</td>
<td>3 (1.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets products</td>
<td>3 (10)</td>
<td>15 (8.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18 (5.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9 (5.2)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Automotive and automotive related</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>34 (29.1)</td>
<td>34 (10.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronics</td>
<td>2 (6.7)</td>
<td>7 (4.1)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous products and services</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 (4.7)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8 (2.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30 (100)</td>
<td>172 (100)</td>
<td>117 (100)</td>
<td>319 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main Study: Audience Understandings of Green Advertising

Method

Qualitative approaches are ideal methods of collecting data about consumer interpretations of green advertising (Eckhardt et al., 2010). Focus groups are particularly useful for understudied areas and topics that may be contentious or polarizing. Survey questions might allow individuals to answer anonymously, but they suffer from problems of social desirability (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010) and force respondents to answer within a narrow set of pre-determined options. Focus groups allow for deep discussion and nuanced insight from the consumer’s perspective. While not generalizable in the sense of a survey, focus group data provide rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study.

The primary goal of this study was to examine how consumers process and interpret these green advertisements and what role they play in green consumer motivations. This was carried out through a series of focus groups with consumers in a large city in the Southwest who regularly watch and read at least one of the media channels examined in the preliminary study. Focus group participants were recruited...
by a market research firm and paid $25. Participants were screened to make sure they were the primary shopper in the household, were between 30–65 years old, were female and had read/watched one of the multimedia channels in the past six months. Three focus groups were carried out one evening in April 2010 and were facilitated by the first author who used a structured interview guide. The focus groups had seven participants (total \( n = 21 \)), lasted one hour each and were audiotaped for transcribing. Data were analyzed for common patterns and categories were allowed to develop. Following an iterative process, these categories coalesced into overarching themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spiggle, 1994) that were evaluated for validity and credibility (Maxwell, 1992; Patton, 2002; Wolcott, 1990).

Focus group participants represented a diverse sample in terms of age, race/ethnicity, educational level, and income. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 62. Thirteen participants were white, five were African-American, one was Native American, and two declined to identify their race. Of the 19 who did, 4 also identified as Hispanic. In terms of education, one participant had a high school education; eight respondents had some college or a two-year degree; another eight had a four-year degree; and four participants had postgraduate degrees.

**Findings and Discussion**

After a series of ice breaker questions intended to orient everyone to the topic at hand, participants were asked open-ended questions about what being a green consumer meant to them, what they thought of green advertising, how they judge these ads and what role advertising played in their purchase choices. Participants were then presented with five green advertisements pulled from the sample of coded ads, purposively sampled to reflect the different product categories most common in green advertising. The ads were for Origins Skincare, Arm & Hammer deodorant, Whirlpool high-efficiency washing machine and dryer, Ozarka Natural Spring Water and Stonyfield organic yogurt. Participants were asked to look at each ad, describe what they saw and tell a story about what was happening in the ad. The purpose of these open-ended, broadly themed questions was to yield insight into individual perceptions of environmental claims contained in them without asking the question pointedly. Doing so might put participants on the defensive or have a chilling effect on the conversation.

A conflicted response to green advertising

When it comes to making informed consumption choices, participants said advertising played a small but important role in addition to other green cues, including product labels and packaging. Some packaging aspects, like green and natural color tones, depictions of nature, environmental icons like the three-arrowed recycling logo, and brand names that incorporate the word “green” all served as helpful shortcuts. Participants treated them like heuristics, trusting them to signify that the product was, in some way, an environmentally friendly, ecologically superior
alternative. And yet, this reliance on green heuristics was complicated and oftentimes contradictory. Participants criticized these ads as insincere and manipulative, reactions that are consistent with the PKM and echo findings about advertising skepticism and distrust of big business (Bonini, McKillop, & Mendonca, 2007). As PKM would suggest, participants seem to be calling on their stored knowledge and experiences with persuasive messages and applying them critically to their assessment of green advertising. Participants were cynical and suspicious, expressing concern that they, as consumers, were being taken advantage of and that green advertising was a gimmick.

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. (Participant #7, Focus Group #2)

Participants’ skepticism extended to their opinions of green heuristics. They acknowledged that green heuristics offer useful shortcuts when making green purchases, but these simple signals (a green logo, green packaging) can also put them on the defensive and prime their concerns about 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 trying to sell? (P7, FG2)

Despite this initial skepticism, in the course of discussing the various ads, participants came around to viewing them as largely positive, acceptable messages. For the sake of clarity and manuscript length, this discussion will focus on a single ad, the Ozarka Natural Spring Water ad, as a means to provide detailed insight into how consumers interpret green advertising. This exemplar approach has been used fruitfully in other scholarship related to analyses of content (de Burgh-Woodman & King, 2012; Hirsto, 2011). Although participants responded in similar ways to all five ads, the Ozarka ad was chosen because it, more than the other four, most closely skirts the issue of greenwashing and best illustrates the tensions inherent in green advertising. Our goal in this study was to understand how self-identified green consumers rationalize their non-green consumption choices, either by choosing not to buy environmentally friendly products or services or by choosing to buy environmentally damaging products or services. Bottled water sold in single-use plastic containers serves as a good example of this latter category.

The Ozarka Natural Spring Water ad ran in the women’s lifestyle magazines sampled in study one. Ozarka was acquired by Nestle in 1987 and bills itself as 100% natural, locally sourced spring water. The ad is part of Ozarka’s commercial campaign to promote its new environmentally friendly bottle design. The advertisement features an Ozarka bottle in the center foreground, situated against a pristine countryside backdrop featuring a bright blue sky, rolling hills, a wide, slow-moving stream, green grass, wildflowers and a setting sun 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 is the bottle’s dye-free cap; the second is the bottle’s smaller label that uses less paper; and the third is the body of the bottle that uses 30% less plastic. The evidence supporting these claims about the bottle are found in a footnote at the bottom of the advertisement and presented in a very small font.

The potential is very real for this ad to be read as greenwashing, defined as environmental advertising without environmental substance (Kangun et al., 1991). Bottled water is widely thought of as an environmentally unfriendly product category even when sold in less environmentally damaging bottles, like Ozarka’s (Gashler, 2008). Among focus group participants, initial reactions to the water bottle ad were in keeping with this greenwashing interpretation. As PKM would predict, participants were skeptical of the product and highly critical of the environmental claims. For example, participants noted that the bottle might use less plastic, as the claim stated, but this was still more plastic than would be needed if people opted for reusable bottles or drank tap water.

After expressing concern about the pseudo-green attributes of an otherwise ecologically damaging product, the conversation in each focus group shifted. Their evaluation of it became more complicated and nuanced, with participants weighing the various factors at play when individual consumers determine the various benefits and costs of buying green products. This turn in the conversation represented a shift from the ideologically preferred reading of the ad (i.e., as an example of greenwashing) to a norm-violating one that interpreted the ad as adequate and promoting an acceptable product. Participants rationalized why they, as green consumers, would willingly engage in the purchase of non-green products. The rationalizations took a number of forms.

“I drink it anyway and I know I shouldn’t”

In keeping with the theory of motivated reasoning, participants seemed to process the ads in ways that were consistent with their identity as green consumers and in terms of the desirability of the product (Byrne & Hart, 2009; Paharia et al., 2013). Participants processed the Ozarka ad in a way that allowed them as green consumers, to retain their green identity while still supporting an environmentally degrading product. Participants understood their positive evaluation of single-use plastic water bottles as norm violating and non-green, but were also quick to rationalize how this evaluation was not at odds with their environmental orientations. Even though participants acknowledged that buying bottled water was not a green choice, they rationalized it as a product that met certain other criteria, such as convenience, that made it acceptable. In particular, of the five rationalization techniques identified by neutralization theory, two were employed by participants to justify their acceptance of non-green products, including denial of responsibility and denial of injury (Chatzidakis et al., 2007; Grove et al., 1989; Strutton et al., 1994).
"I mean, personally, sometimes I have to buy a bottle"

First, participants invoked the denial of responsibility technique (Sykes & Matza, 1957), in which individuals do not see themselves as responsible for their actions because of outside forces or influences beyond their control. For example, participants noted that when making consumption choices, they had 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 would buy a water filter, but as a renter, she felt her only option was to buy bottled water. Two other participants mentioned that for households with children, having bottled water at hand was much healthier than soda or juice. In these scenarios, individual consumers cannot be held accountable for their choices because their hands are forced by external factors.

“It’s convenient and you’re being as conscious as you can”

Second, participants invoked the denial of injury technique (Sykes & Matza, 1957, p. 667), in which the consequences of the individual’s choices are not seen as particularly damaging or if they are, the harm can easily be sustained or minimized. During the focus group discussions, participants rationalized 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 justified as the right choice because consumers are supporting a company that is making an effort at reducing plastic waste. Bottled water might not be a perfect product, but this brand of bottled water is better (i.e., less harmful) than all the others.

People do buy it (bottled water), 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)

Although the remaining three rationalization techniques were not invoked by these focus group participants, it does not necessarily mean they are not relevant factors in evaluating norm-violating green advertising. However, given the time and attention participants devoted to denial of responsibility and denial of injury, it suggests that these two rationalization techniques might be most salient for green consumers’ evaluations of environmentally inferior products.

Ultimately, participants presented a conflicted story in response to the Ozarka ad. It was recognized as greenwashing and as a green product of dubious character, but it was also justified as an acceptable non-green purchase, given the trade-offs consumers are forced to make and the minimal harm that results. It may not be ideal, but participants can rationalize it as making the best of a bad situation. Although they responded initially as PKM would suggest by assessing the ads critically, they suppressed these concerns and critiques by rationalizing the potential advertising deceit with justifications that the product was acceptable.
Conclusions and Implications

The content analysis data indicate that green advertising is common in the promotion of fast-moving consumer goods; however, most of these persuasive claims are vague and potentially misleading. Rather than relying on established, verifiable evidence, such as the kind conveyed through an eco-label like USDA organic, the majority of green advertisers are incorporating meaningless, unregulated claims, such as being “100% natural” or “from nature.” These claims might appear authentically green, but are mostly unsubstantiated claims of being “eco-friendly” or “from Mother Nature.”

As the focus groups suggest, however, when presented with these ads, consumers are nuanced in their assessments of green claims and how these messages influence their green consumer motives. Consumers see these vague, green heuristics not only as opportunistic and misleading, but also as useful and efficient. It suggests that consumers are complicated and oftentimes contradictory in their assessment of real-world green advertising and green products, comfortably occupying an ambiguous middle ground.

Limitations

Before discussing the theoretical and practical implications of the study, we first address the study’s constraints. First, the content analysis, while methodical, was not reflective of the media landscape in its entirety. We focused exclusively on lifestyle content in order to enhance our insights within a specific genre. Studies of other genres, such as sports content, might find different patterns of green frames and different rates of occurrence. Second, the focus group findings are instructive but are not meant to be generalizable to the wider population as a whole. As is the nature of qualitative research, these focus groups offer rich detail about a small sample of green consumers; the findings are not meant to speak to all green consumers or all contexts of green consumption.

Theoretical implications

Despite these limitations, the results of the content analysis and focus groups suggest interesting theoretical and applied implications. Rather than deflecting the persuasive message or rendering it moot, as PKM would suggest, these participants not only acknowledged the messages were persuasive and potentially deceptive but also evaluated them as useful and acceptable. While participants seemed to activate their persuasion knowledge, they discounted it and rationalized both the persuasive attempt and the product being promoted as acceptable. By bringing the theoretical lens of motivated reasoning to issues of persuasion knowledge activation, we are better able to understand how green consumers can simultaneously appraise misleading green ads as positive and rationalize their norm-violating non-green product evaluations as acceptable.
These findings offer implications for PKM and for the green gap. First, the focus group results indicate that individuals can have positive reactions to persuasion attempts. Even though participants perceived the green advertisements as deceptive and questioned the motives of the advertisers responsible for the ads, they also readily discounted their own defensive arguments in favor of a positive attitude toward the ad and the advertiser. These findings build on previous studies (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008; Kirmani & Campbell, 2004) that indicate that persuasion knowledge activation can yield positive outcomes and does not always result in defensive or reactive consumer responses.

It suggests a two-step process in which individuals bring to bear a number of different motives in their assessment of persuasive messages and that these factors moderate potential defensive or deflecting evaluations. Rather than simply activating their persuasion knowledge and responding to it, either positively or negatively, our data indicate individuals might transition through a number of responses. Our focus group data begin to specify this process and reveal that individuals first activate their persuasion knowledge with negative attitudinal responses, but then re-evaluate their attitudes to reframe their assessment as positive. Participants were motivated to process ad messages in ways that conformed to their self-identity as green consumers. They view themselves as environmentally responsible and to maintain this self-assessment, they rationalize pseudo-green advertising and non-green products as acceptable alternatives. The two-step flow of persuasion knowledge activation identified in this study enriches the PKM theory and could be fruitfully examined in additional studies.

Second, these findings suggest that the green attitude–behavior gap might be the result of a variant of boomerang effects related to motivated reasoning (Byrne & Hart, 2009; Gromet et al., 2013). When presented with persuasive messages for products that are ecologically inferior, like bottled water, green consumers process the information in a way that encourages them to evaluate these norm-violating, non-green consumption choices as acceptable. The effect is to amplify the misleading message of the ad and to foster increased acceptance of non-green products. Under conditions of conventional boomerang effects, the pro-social message is assumed to be truthful and correct in its efforts to encourage normatively preferred behaviors, like reducing smoking or littering (Reich & Robertson, 1979; Wolburg, 2006). In boomerang effect situations, audiences are motivated to do the opposite of what the message encourages and engage in norm-violating behaviors. In the case of green advertising messages that are misleading or deceptive, we see a similar trend in terms of amplification effects of the message. In the case of the Ozarka bottled water ad, the message promotes the pseudo-green attributes of an ecologically damaging product, and rather than evaluating the product as inferior and the ad as greenwashing, green consumers rationalize the product as acceptable and amplify the non-green message.

Third, the rationalizations offered by these female green consumers build on previous work looking at gender and neutralization theory. Although limited, an
exploration of gender effects on dishonesty and cheating suggests women are more likely than men to engage in rationalizations as they contemplate deviant or dishonest behaviors (Ward & Beck, 1990). Women, to a greater degree than men, are socialized to obey rules and adhere to normative social expectations. Consequently, when women violate social expectations, they are more likely than men who violate social expectations to rationalize these deviations with various neutralization techniques. Although not the primary focus of this study, future research could explore whether male green consumers display the same patterns of neutralization or if their norm-violating positive evaluations of misleading green advertising are not seen as requiring the same degree of rationalization.

Overall, these findings suggest the attitude–behavior gap among self-identified green consumers is complex and complicated. Rather than being misled into approving of environmentally harmful products as a result of deceptive advertising, it seems green consumers willingly accept non-green products. Painting ecologically inferior products with a veneer of green allows environmentally concerned consumers to maintain their green identities by rationalizing their norm-violating acceptance of non-green products as justified and congruent with their self-concept.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the members of our undergraduate research team, Nicole Bernard, Alex Holmes, and Akua Sencherey, for their help with coding the magazine and TV ads.

Notes

1. Unlike the first category, which includes descriptors or catch phrases with no consistent or uniform meaning, the second category includes claims that are regulated and standardized. The former are akin to “cheap talk” and amount to little more than non-binding quality claims (Cason & Gangadharan, 2002).

2. See: http://www.ozarkawater.com/#/about/about_us

References


