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Green advertising effects on attitude and choice of advertising themes.

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Abstract

The aims of this article is to analyse whether there are differences in green advertisement attitudes between high involved and low involved consumers, to compare high and low involvement consumer's cognitive responses and affective responses towards advertisements and examine the extent of the importance on certain themes that both high involvement and low involvement consumers consider. Themes such as company image, environmental labels, and product recycling symbols. A random sample of 207 consumers was taken from Victoria (Australia).

The study shows that there are differences between the two groups in terms of their attitude towards green advertising with respect to all the dimensions and the low involved customers appear to have a stronger disregard for the green advertising across all the perceptible measures towards green advertising. The findings provide useful insights to practitioners as to the type of themes preferred for green advertising.

Introduction

The emergence of the green challenge has brought about changes in consumers buying behaviour making it a highly debatable topic from the point of view of academics. Corporations have contributed to changes within the corporate structure in order to meet consumer's green needs by becoming more environmentally responsible which is reflected through cleaner manufacturing processes and green promotion (Kassarjian, 1971; Kinnear et al., 1974; Menon & Menon, 1997; Porter & Van der Linde, 1995; Scerbinski, 1991; Ottman, 1993, Fitzgerald, 1993).

The last decade had witnessed an influx of green brands in the market due to consumer demand thus permitting green marketing to emerge into a multidimensional strategic and tactical process. Since consumers will always have environmental concerns (Peattie, 1992), there will be a parallel rise in environmental advertising accompanying increased consumer interest in the environment (Carlson, Grove and Kangun, 1993).

Advertising terms such as recyclable, environmentally friendly, ozone safe, biodegradable have become popular in green advertisements and consumers are often exposed to such messages, while some of these messages are met with consumer resistance. A survey indicated that only 6% believed that environmental advertising were 'very believable' and 90% indicated that these claims were 'somewhat', 'not very', or 'not at all' believable (Chase and Smith, 1992). The credibility of green advertising is relatively low (Kilbourne, 1995). This is crucial for green products as research indicates that attitudes towards the advertisement leads to changes in brand attitudes (Gorn 1982; Lutz,

MacKenzie and Belch, 1983; Mitchell and Olson, 1981), this change in brand attitude could lead potentially to loss in sales.

Research has been somewhat limited in studies regarding green advertising (Mayor, Scammon and Zick, 1992; Scammon and Mayer, 1991) and very little is known about the nature of what green consumers perceive as important in green advertisements. This research will distinguish between high and low green consumers and their attitudes towards green advertising. While it is not the intent of the article to focus on the whole area of attitudes toward the ad, it is essential to recognise some dimensions of attitude towards the ad. Thus the aim of the article is:

- To analyse whether there are differences in green advertisement attitudes between high involved and low involved consumers
- To compare high and low involvement consumer's cognitive responses and affective responses towards advertisements
- To examine the extent of the importance on certain themes that both high involvement and low involvement consumers consider. Themes such as company image, environmental labels, and product recycling symbols.

Green research can be categorised as consumer based and ad based (Shrum, McCarty and Lowrey (1995). Consumer based identifies characteristics of consumers that differentiate between levels of environmental concern or behaviour and ad based addresses components of the ad. To understand green advertising, this research will encapsulate both; consumer based i.e. characteristics of consumers as well as ad based focusing on the attitude towards the advertisement.

Green research: Consumer Based Characteristics

Consumer based research determines characteristics of green consumers and their concerns towards the environment, whereby, researchers have used various ways to categorise greenness. One is through environmental consciousness, (Vining and Ebreo, 1990; Hackett, 1993; Jackson, 1985; Maloney, Ward, and Braught, 1975). While this approach indicates a comprehensive profile of the green consumer, it has been criticised on the grounds that it is uncertain whether it reflects environmental quality (Van Liere and Dunlap, 1981).

While some researchers have used the socio-demographics, such as sex, age, education and social class (Schlegelmilch, Diamantopoulos and Bohlen, 1994), others bend towards personality measures, such as locus of control, alienation, conservatism and dogmatism (Crosby, Gill and Taylor, 1981; Henion, and Wilson, 1976; Kinnear, Taylor, and Armed, 1974). Demographics as such are poor variables as they do not provide much value (Schlegelmilch, Diamantopoulos and Bohlen, 1994), while personality variables only explain a small composition of the overall variability of behavioural measures (Webster, 1975). It is suggested that it is best to avoid using personality characteristics alone (Hooley, and Saunders, 1993), as they do not lend themselves easily to a segmentation strategy as they are complex in the measurement process (Webster, 1975).

Researchers have made finer distinctions in classifying different types of greenness (Iyer, Banerjee and Gulas, 1994), while Shrum, McCarty and Lowrey (1995, p. 72) consider 'a green consumer is anyone whose purchase behaviour is influenced by environmental concerns'. This research also considers a green consumer to be one whose behaviour is greatly influenced by environmental concerns. The goal here is to provide an understanding of high and low green consumers and their attitude on advertising. However, previous research have categorised consumers into various shades of green (Banerjee, Gulas and Iyer, 1995). Consequently, we are not interested in identifying the different shades of green as our intention is to distinguish and differentiate the high and low involved consumers.

More specifically, the research was structured to investigate whether highly involved or active green consumers (i.e., those whose purchase behaviour is greatly influenced by environmental concerns), and low involved or passive green consumers (i.e., those whose purchase behaviour is minimally influenced by environmental concerns) differ in their perceptions of green claims. It will identify that those consumers that are highly involved with the environment (the high-involvement group) are intrinsically motivated to be alert to environmental attributes of products (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995).

Green research: Ad based - on attitudes towards the ad

Consumers form feelings (affect) and judgments (cognition) when exposed to an advertisement which affects their attitude towards the ad and beliefs about the brand (Batra and Ray, 1986). In assessing consumer attitudes towards an advertisement, it is stated that it is important to distinguish between two separate measures that is the cognitive evaluations (judgments) and affective responses towards the ad (feelings experienced from exposure) (Madden, Allen and Twible, 1988; Button and Lichtenstein, 1988). Feelings are properties of the individual while cognitive evaluations tend to be properties of the advertisement, and consumers are more likely to agree on whether an ad is credible than to agree on how the ad makes them feel (Edell and Burke, 1987). It has been suggested that feelings are more affected by the similarity to other advertisements, consumer's mood and the present environment (Gardener, 1985; Aaker, Stayman, and Hagerty, 1986). Nonetheless, feelings conveyed by an ad not only influence the attitude towards the ad but also affects the consumer's evaluations of the brand (Edell and Burke, 1987).

There is a wide variety of feelings, and other researchers have indicated that both positive and negative feelings towards the ads tend to exist with both influencing an attitude (Muehling, 1987).

Many researchers have suggested that instead of classifying affective responses into different types, it would be more appropriate to identify the dimensions under which different types may be found (Batra and Ray, 1986). For instance, Wundt (1896) suggested that sphere of consciousness described by emotion or feeling could be accounted for three dimensions such as pleasant-unpleasantness, relaxation-tension and calm-excitement. The parsimony inherent in the notion of dimensions is useful, the economy is lost if too many dimensions are proposed (Batra and Ray, 1986).

To understand the attitude towards an ad, both affective and cognitive evaluations are undertaken. Cognitive evaluations tend to be properties of the advertisement, and consumers are more likely to agree on whether an ad is credible. In order to examine credibility in green advertisements, three variables are used in this context- green ads are 'believable', 'green ads are convincing' and 'green ads are favourable'. While feelings are properties of the individual, and hence two variables are considered 'green ads are good' and 'green ads are pleasant'.

Research Design

Sample

To determine the study's objective, a random telephone interview was conducted by "A Square Consultancy" on a random sample of 207 consumers in the state of Victoria (Australia) taken from the residential listings in the White Pages. The age of participants in the sample comprised of the following: 59% of the sample fell between the ages of 18-34; 29% of the sample fell between 35-54 and 12 % of the samples were between 55 to 64+. Those employed were 63% and 37% were unemployed. Professionals comprised about 4%, administrative 15%, technical 23%, trades 12% and any other not falling within this category was 46%.

Methodology

There were four questions that constituted consumer involvement. This study used similar measures for high-low involvement scales adopted by Schuwerk and Lekoff-Hagius (1995). The overall involvement with the environment using four 7-point Likert type scale items included the following statements:

- a. I am concerned about the environment.
- b. The condition of the environment affects the quality of my life.
- c. I am willing to make sacrifices to protect the environment.
- d. My actions impact on the environment.

These items, which were developed and refined by Schuwerk and Lekoff-Hagius (1995), produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 implying adequate internal consistency and reliability. The reliability of these items in this study measured at Cronbach's alpha of 0.89.

Although, there have been various shades of green (Shrum, McCarthy and Lowery, 1995) this research would attempt to segregate consumers into two groups as we are interested mainly in what the high involved consumers think about green claims, as they fundamentally form this green niche market. Thus, these scales were then further divided into two groups namely, high environmental preference groups and low environmental preference groups using K-means cluster. Responses to the above four questions were sought and the interviewer made prompts to some factors that related to the general level of environmental consciousness or actions such as recycling that impacts on the environment (Stem, and Oskamp, 1987; Van Liere, and Dunlap, 1980).

Cluster analysis was used to identify relatively homogeneous groups of cases based on selected characteristics; two clusters were formed (see Table 1). The convergence was achieved due to small or no change in cluster centres. The maximum absolute coordinate change for any centre is .000. The current iteration is 3. While the minimum distance between initial centres is 12.042

Table 2 shows the number of cases included in each cluster formed. There were 52 low involvement cases and 155 high involvement cases. Consumers that scored high in this area were grouped as those who were aware of their actions impacting on the environment

and were willing to make sacrifices if the need arises. They were categorised as high involved consumers and vice versa.

Table 1: Final Cluster Centres		
	Cluster	
	1	2
I am concerned about the environment	4	2
The conditions of the environment affect the quality of life	4	2
I am willing to make a sacrifice to protect the environment	5	2
My actions impact on the environment	5	2

Table 2: Number of Cases in each Cluster		
	2	155
Cluster	52	
Valid	207	

The same measure that was used for measuring customers' attitude toward advertisements used by MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) and Schuhwerk and Lekoff-Hagius (1995) was used in this study. The respondents extent of attitude was measured using five 7-point Likert Type scales, i.e., good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, favourable/unfavourable, convincing/unconvincing, and believable/unbelievable. Schuhwerk and Lefkock-Hagius found that all the advertising evaluation items, averaged to form a single latent variable reflecting the customers' attitude toward the green advertising messages. However the internal consistency measure (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.87 in their study was not achieved in this study (0.69). Although this measure of reliability is somewhat lower than expected, for theoretical reasons we will maintain these variables in the analysis of the results. The research instrument also included questions on advertising claims and the extent of customers' perception of the importance of green appeals.

Hypotheses testing

To obtain a statistical comparison of the means of the two groups in the sample, the independent samples t-test was used. The respondents were asked to express their extent of attitude towards green ads listed below. Consumers were asked to respond to a scale measuring from 1-7, where 1 indicated very strongly agree and 7 indicated very strongly

disagree. The two groups that were involved were those that had high and low involvement orientation toward environmental issues. The hypotheses conceptualised to be tested were as follows:

Hypothesis 1

The environmentally high involved consumers have a more favourable attitude toward green advertising than the low involved consumers.

Hypothesis 2

The environmentally high involved customers find green advertising as being more:

- a. pleasant
- b. convincing
- c. believable
- d. favourable
- a. e.good

The results oft-tests indicate (Table 3) that:

1. There is a difference between the two groups in terms of their attitude towards green advertising with respect to all the dimensions.
2. The low involved customers appear to have a stronger disregard for the green advertising across all the perceptive measures towards green advertising.

The results indicate that there is a significant difference in the attitudes of green advertising for high and low involved consumers. Based on cognitive evaluation high involved consumers expressed that green ads were 'believable' and 'favourable' and based on affective evaluation these consumers regarded that green ads were 'good'. However, on the cognitive evaluation of ads being 'convincing' and affective evaluation of the ads being 'pleasant', both groups were somewhat neutral on their feelings about green ads being 'pleasant' and their belief on green ads being 'convincing'. While the low involved consumers generally disagreed that green advertisements were 'good', 'believable' and 'favourable'.

Furthermore, the results of this study find evidence to suggest that only the low involved groups had poorly rated attitudes towards advertising green brands. This may be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, these consumers may not be interested in green advertisement because they are unwilling to buy green brands, since a poor attitude towards green brands, potentially, articulates unfavourable intention to purchase a green brand. Secondly, they may have a genuine dislike for the way green products are currently being advertised in terms of format and contents.

If low involved consumers represent a potential future market for green brands, then marketing strategies should be aimed at creating more favourable, pleasant, good, believable and convincing advertisements attempting to change attitudes of these low involved consumers.

	high involvement vs low involvement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Green ads are favourable	low involvement	52	5.00	1.268	.176
	high involvement	155	3.59	1.558	.125
Green ads are pleasant	low involvement	52	5.00	1.155	.160
	high involvement	155	4.30	1.135	.091
Green ads are convincing	low involvement	52	5.06	1.211	.168
	high involvement	155	4.33	1.521	.122
Green ads are believable	low involvement	52	5.04	1.220	.169
	high involvement	155	3.91	1.703	.137
Green ads are good	low involvement	52	5.10	1.241	.172
	high involvement	155	3.43	1.599	.128

Green ads are favourable	(t(205) = 6.55, p <.01)
Green ads are pleasant	(t(205) = 3.85, p <.01)
Green ads are convincing	(t(205) = 3.51, p <.01)
Green ads are believable	(t(205) = 5.19, p <.01)
Green ads are good	(t(205) = 7.78, p <.01)

Consumer's perception towards green themes

What do consumers perceive to be important with green advertising themes? Voss (1991) suggests that there are four primary areas to target in an advertising campaign. These include the product itself, packaging, manufacturing process and environmentally cause related promotion. The green advertising as suggested by Banerjee, Gulas and Iyer (1995) can be any advertisement that may explicitly or implicitly address the relationship between a product and the biophysical environment; it should have the characteristic of being able to promote a green lifestyle and enhance a corporate image of social responsibility.

Given below are some green themes that were examined in terms of how important consumers regard these themes to be used in advertising.

It may be observed (Table 5) that there is a substantial difference between high and low involved consumers with respect to green advertising themes. High involved consumers considered all themes important with the exception of those that promote corporate image. While in this case 56% of high involved customers regarded corporate image poorly in relative terms and 44% of the low involved group supported corporate image themes, of all the themes they regarded this theme as important. Furthermore, it may also be observed that among the low involved respondents there was little support for environmentally oriented cause related consumer promotions (Table 5).

Table 5: Tests for how important consumers regarded each green advertising promotion		
	High Involve Importance %	Low Involve Importance %
Ads should show product recycling symbols	86	14
Ads should emphasize on how consumers will obtain environmental benefits	75	25
Ads should show environmental labels, based on third party accreditation	75	25
Ads should promote company image	56	44
Ads should promote a promotion of donating to environmental groups or causes	81	19
Ads should be clear about environmental claims	75	25

ANOVA were subsequently used to determine if there was any significant difference in the demographics of those respondent's attitudes towards the advertisement. With regards to occupation, income and age the results show that there was no significant difference between the groups.

Implications for Practitioners

There is evidence to suggest that there is a difference between high and low consumers attitudes towards green brands. While there is a significant difference in consumer attitudes towards green brands, marketers may want to identify these consumers and should make attempts at positioning advertising strategies differently, if they want to attract environmentally low involved consumers.

Some of the evidence identified by this research was that high involved consumers did not find green ads convincing enough. This result, arguably, could reflect the influence of extensive propaganda by the media and exaggeration of green advertising. As suggested by some of the researchers the credibility of green advertising is relatively low (Fisk, 1974; Kangun, Carlson and Grove, 1991; and Iyer and Banerjee, 1993). To make green ads convincing enough mainly lies in the hands of the marketing manager, with the focus on claims being truthful, transparent and clear.

Although, advertising has three functions, to inform, remind and persuade, the aim of green advertising is to create awareness and tentative strong attitudes towards brands and companies (Adcock, 2000). Companies today have a mandatory requirement of being environmentally responsible, so whether or not promoting company image should be used in advertising would depend on how the marketing manager would like to position the company, as such high involved consumers felt it was not particularly important.

Ads should promote a promotion of donating to environmental groups or causes, was also highly considered by the high involved groups, in other words companies should not fall short of donating for a worthy cause. This in tum can increase stronger publicity for green companies.

Ads should emphasise on how consumers will obtain environmental benefits, for example, if a product is environmentally friendly, then marketers will have to prove the product will not harm the environment. This will be the most difficult challenge that marketers will face; to make it verifiable it may require to be backed with some scientific and objective substantiation.

In indicating their responses for product recycling symbols, caution must be exercised, as the US Federal Trade Commission (1996) suggests that the symbol of recycle, the three chasing arrows, if used without any textual qualification would be confusing to the consumer. The symbol should either refer to recyclable or recycled. Unless the product contains 100 percent recycled materials, the label must indicate how much of the finished product is in fact of recycled material.

An encouragement to use third party labels was found to be particularly important; this advocates a call from an external source to verify claims. If used by companies then third party labels will rule out the doubts and negative feelings consumers have about green advertisements

Addressing the needs of a green consumer, arguably, may not be easily achieved with the same assumptions and specifications used in conventional advertising, as environmental advertising is much more complex since it deals with consumers who may have a raised and sensitive environmental consciousness (Iyer, 1995).

In general, most green advertisements focus on 'altruistic motives' and push consumers to engage in green pro-environmental behaviours so as to save the environment (Iyer, 1995). It is more complex than envisaged because it is not only the green image that is important but also the product itself. Very often the product itself may not be able to meet the criteria set by consumers. For example, to be biodegradable, the product may meet this criteria but not the quality standards as required by the consumer.

Although, our findings provide insights about the perceptions that consumers have about green advertising some cautionary observations are warranted. First, the generalisation of the findings is limited by few cognitive and affective evaluations. By considering further evaluations, marketers may be able to develop a more meaningful explanation for green advertisements. Secondly, due to limitations in the proportion of the sample size it is best to draw tentative conclusions from this study. A sample including a larger number of low involved consumers would seem worthwhile and may provide more definitive results. In the future research studies, intentions to buy green brands should be further considered as the ultimate aim of advertising is to persuade consumers to buy.

Conclusions

The study shows that there is a difference between the two groups in terms of their attitude towards green advertising with respect to all the dimensions and the low involved customers appear to have a stronger disregard for the green advertising across all the perceptible measures towards green advertising. The findings suggest other opportunities for future research. Understanding how green advertisements influence behaviour will be a valuable area of future research.

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