

Believe It or Not: Do Brands' Green Claims and Greenness Make a Difference?

Wi-Suk Kwon, Auburn University, U.S.A.
Hyejeong Kim, California State University, Long Beach, U.S.A.
Basil Englis, Berry College, U.S.A.

Keywords: Green claim, credibility, green perception, purchase intention

Background and Purpose. The environment and issues pertaining to it have been an increasing concern for consumers and marketers, resulting in the proliferation of green products and green marketing (Dash, 2009). Due to highly prevalent greenwashed claims (e.g., misleading green advertisements), consumers tend to be skeptical about green initiatives of a company (Furlow, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how consumers' perceived credibility of a brand's green claims may influence their perceptions of the brand's greenness as well as purchase decision. Further, this study investigates how these influences may differ depending on the consumers' interest in environmental sustainability.

Literature Review and Hypotheses. *Credibility* refers to "the believability of the product position information contained in a brand" (Erdem & Swait, 2004, p. 191) and may influence consumers' attitudes and behavior in the marketplace (Thøgersen, Haugaard, & Olesen, 2010). *Perceived greenness* is the extent to which consumers think that the product, brand, or store is environmentally friendly. Thus, as a consumer perceives that a brand's green claim is more credible, the consumer's perception of the brand's greenness (H1) as well as intent to purchase products from the brand (H2) are likely to increase. We also predict that consumers' perception of a brand's greenness would positively influence their intent to purchase from the brand (H3). Environmental concern influences consumers' product and brand choice. Consumers with greater environmental concerns tend to have greater knowledge of environmental topics (Ellen, 1994), which increases their proenvironmental behavior (Martin & Simintiras, 1995) such as green purchasing. Individuals who believe that their behavior will have a positive effect on the environment are likely to engage in environmentally friendly activities (Kim & Choi, 2005). Thus, purchase decisions of consumers who are more highly concerned about the environment and more involved in proenvironmental behavior may be more strongly influenced by the brand's green claim credibility and greenness. Thus, we predict that perceived credibility of a brand's green claim (H4) and perceived greenness of the brand (H5) have greater effects on purchase intentions among consumers with high (vs. low) environmental concern (H4a; H5a) and consumers with high (vs. low) participation in proenvironmental behaviors (H4b; H5b). Given that consumers' past experience of purchasing from the brand can have an effect on their future purchase decision, purchase experience (yes/no) was included as a control variable when testing hypotheses with purchase intention as a dependent variable.

Method. An online survey was conducted with a U.S. national sample of 862 consumers (21-64 years old, 50% women), recruited from an online consumer panel of a marketing research firm. Participants were randomly assigned to one of 52 consumer product brands, selected through pretests, as the context for their survey responses. The questionnaire included items

measuring purchase experience with the assigned brand (yes/no) and perceived credibility of the brand's green claims (5-point scale, Kwon, Englis, & Mann, 2016), perceived greenness of the brand (7-point scale; Kwon et al., 2016), purchase intention (5-point scale), and environmental concern (5-point scale; Steger, Pierce, Steel, & Lovrich, 1989). The questionnaire also included a checklist listing 18 proenvironmental behaviors culled from the literature (e.g., McDonald & Oates, 2006; Cleveland, Kalamas, & Laroche, 2012) and demographic items. A median split method was applied to the participants' average environmental concern item scores and the number of proenvironmental behaviors in which they participate to divide participants into the high and low groups in terms of environmental concern and proenvironmental behavior, respectively.

Results. Regression analysis results revealed that consumers' perceived credibility of a brand's green claim positively influenced their perception of the brand's greenness ($\beta^* = .47, p < .001$), supporting H1. However, consumers' purchase intention was significantly predicted only by their past purchase experience ($\beta^* = .68, p < .001$), and neither perceived credibility of the green claim nor perceived greenness of the brand significantly explained purchase intention ($p > .05$), rejecting H2 and H3. Further, although results did not support H4 or H5, group comparisons rendered interesting insights. The relationship between perceived brand greenness and purchase intention was negative for consumers with low environmental concern ($\beta^* = -.14, p < .01$) and consumers with low participation in proenvironmental behavior ($\beta^* = -.17, p < .01$), whereas this relationship was non-significant for consumers with high environmental concern or high participation in proenvironmental behavior ($p > .05$). The relationship between perceived credibility of a brand's green claims and purchase intention also showed a similar pattern for the low ($\beta^* = -.14, p < .01$) and high ($p > .05$) proenvironmental behavior groups. Surprisingly, this relationship was positive for consumers with low environmental concern ($\beta^* = .04, p < .05$), yet negative for consumers with high environmental concern ($\beta^* = -.12, p < .05$).

Discussion. Findings of this study indicate that when the brand's green claims are deemed believable, consumers perceive the brand to be environmentally friendly; however, these perceptions do not necessarily lead to the consumers' purchase decisions. Instead, consumers show a high level of inertia in their purchase decisions by following their past purchase experience rather than paying attention to how green the brand is or how credible the brand's green claims are. Further, this inertia is true even with consumers who self-report to be highly concerned about the environment and actively participate in proenvironmental behaviors in other aspects of their lives. Moreover, green claims and brand greenness are suggested to have even a negative effect on the purchase decision of some consumers who have a low interest in environmental sustainability. These findings together suggest that environmental sustainability may still be remaining at a merely conceptual level in general consumers' minds, and their purchase decisions are unmoved by their motivation to be environmentally friendly in spite of all the buzzwords regarding environmental sustainability. Thus, marketers need to be careful in gauging the effectiveness of their green marketing efforts in earning consumers' hearts and purchase actions from their target consumer's perspectives. Findings of this study also have implications for policy makers who implement green consumption initiatives.

References: Available upon request.