



LINKING GREEN SCEPTICISM TO GREEN PURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract:

The increased awareness on climate change and various environmental problems has induced consumers' eco-friendly or green purchase intention. However, the perceptions that firms are disseminating inaccurate or confusing green information (greenwashing) have increased customer scepticism about environmentally friendly or green claims. The link between green scepticism and consumers' intention to buy green products remained unclear. This paper aims to address this lacuna by thoroughly examining the attribution formation, motives and outcome of green scepticism based on the attribution theory. Overall, this comprehensive model advances valuable insights for marketers seeking to understand the conceptually distinct nature of green scepticism and consumer green purchase intention. In a nutshell, this study charts future prospects for green marketing research and presents a number of theoretical and practical significances for business practitioners and marketing scholars.

Keywords:

Green Marketing, Scepticism, Greenwashing, Environmental Concern, Green Products, Sustainability.

Introduction

Green, the color that possesses powerful expressions in every shades of it; every shades cast its' unique essence, might it be positive or negative. It is undeniably pleasant to the eye of the viewer and often symbolizes life, renewal, nature, and energy. However, there must always be a balance in the shades to create such positive aura. Too less or too much of green will turn the

tide around, which is the reason why this study is initiated – not to study on the psychology of the color of green, but on the misuse of such beautiful color to jeopardize the mind of the consumers.

At the present moment, firms use the word green extensively to tag in the products and services that are offered in the market to portray that the products and services are environmental friendly, healthy and safe for consumption. Not only have these initiatives had the ability to boost the firms' competitive advantage and selling point, it also raises the firm's reputation as a green company. Ranging from household products to technology, the green claims are no longer alienated. It is irrefutable that firms included green claims in their offerings due to the increase of demands from the consumers that are growing their concern for the environment. Firms are willing to spend huge amount of money for green marketing while incorporating green issues as part of their organisation strategies to meet such demands. While it has become almost a necessity to profusely include green claims in products and services offered to create the green image while validity of such claims remained questionable, this has led to the rise of societal concern that firms often disseminate false and/or incomplete environment information to mislead the consumers (Parguel et al., 2011; Leonidou & Skarmeeas, 2017), greenwashing.

Therefore, the actual motives of firms in spreading green claims on their green offerings, as well as the offerings attributes, features, environmental benefits and performance rose as consumers doubts in recent years. Such doubts would bring numerous impacts to the firms strategies resulting to shrink in purchase intention of green offerings. The above, serve as the base and define the context of this study – green scepticism (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Leonidou & Skarmeeas, 2017).

The Green Concept

“We are in danger of destroying ourselves by our greed and stupidity. We cannot remain looking inwards at ourselves on a small and increasingly polluted and overcrowded planet.” – Stephen Hawking (Holloway, 2018). The quote above is potent in defining the current situation of the planet, Earth. The Earth is an ecosystem consists of living interacting organisms and the physical environment that are inter-related between one and another. The ecosystem is extremely important to decide the faith of the planet, Earth. Albeit it is supreme to ensure the sustainability of the ecosystem, the advancement of technology and industrialization needs have led to natural resources depletion and environmental destruction (Tan et al., 2017).

‘The Earth is dying’, ‘The Earth is sick’ and ‘Save the Earth’ are common phrases that are no longer rare to the ears. Environmental issues are on the rise, and it has been snowballing each day with pollution, climate change, global warming, deforestation, waste and others (Ooi & Amran, 2019). Such negative change would definitely bring disastrous effects to the living creature of the planet Earth, either physically or mentally. These issues have captured the attention of the society and thus, the consumers are growing their concern on the environment issues (Leonidou & Skarmeeas, 2017). National Geographic Society and GlobeScan (2014) also revealed that the global consumers have increased their concern on environmental issues by 61 percent since 2012, along with sustainable consumer behavior. Additionally, a study conducted by Ulusoy and Barretta (2016) found that consumers with high environmental concern will be more likely to purchase green products creating demand for green offerings.

When there is demand, there is supply, and this is where ‘Green Marketing’ emerged - marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe, as defined by Mishra and Sharma (2014). According to Chen (2008), the reasons why firms adopt green marketing are to utilize green opportunities, increase corporate images, raising product value, enhance competitive advantage and also to comply with environmental trends. This statement could be further supported when the heated consumers’ concern on environmental issues and sustainability led the firms to incorporate environmental issues into their organisation strategies (Nidumolu et al., 2009; Ooi & Amran, 2019). This serves as the opportunity for firms to responds to such demand by developing new or additional green products and services line to fulfill the market demands and most importantly, investing huge sum of money in promoting the green products and services. The ‘green claims’ term such as ‘eco-green’, ‘eco’, ‘environmentally friendly’, ‘sustainability’, ‘earth friendly’, ‘natural’ and ‘biodegradable’ are becoming common practices (Chen et al., 2014) to grab the consumers’ attention and also for profits. In this 20th century, green products and services are literally everywhere; green energy, green technology, green packaging, green cities, green home, green commerce and many more. It has spread over the industries such as household products, grocery, personal care, packaged food and beverage, retail, energy, technology, quick service restaurants, mobile service provider, hotels/hospitality and automobile, worldwide (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017).

Nevertheless, the ‘green claims’ made for green products and services must be true and transparent in order for the consumers to trust that the offerings are genuinely green. Shall the green offerings merely garnish, then, it would defeat the purpose of the consumers in caring and aiming to improve the environmental problems through sustainable behavior. For instance, Frohlich and Calio (2014) reported that the Federal Trade Commission had several cases involving companies such as Sears, Amazon.com & Macy’s which have marketed their products as environmentally friendly bamboo but, in fact, the manufacturing process involved toxic chemicals (misleading and unsubstantiated). Another concept of ‘Green Marketing’ followed along (Dangelico & Vocalelli, 2017) – Greenwashing, the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service. This includes the seven sins of greenwashing such as, sin of the hidden trade-off, sin of no proof, sin of vagueness, sin of irrelevance, sin of lesser of two evils, sin of fibbing and the latest, sin of worshipping false labels. The very same study also revealed that 95% of ‘green products’ commit at least one or more of the seven sins. The act of greenwashing possesses great risks such as loss of trust from the consumers, slowing down the spread of genuine environmental innovation in the marketplace, cynicism and doubts on green claims and the sustainability movement and progress will decelerate.

Despite the willingness of the consumers to change their lifestyle and behavior for a more sustainable future, confusion and trust on environmental messages of products remained as a barrier (PWC, 2008). Hence, the actual motives of the firms in incorporating and spreading green claims will be highly doubted by consumers. Was the firm’s intention purely to help the environment or just for the sake of profits? As the mind and genuine motives of the consumers may have been jeopardize and muddled, the consumers would have the tendency to doubt the environmental benefits or the environmental performance of a green product, which is known as green scepticism (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). Such green trend has resulted to a rather sceptical outcome in the consumer’s perspective. It would bring great impact to the firms, customers, society and environment, shall the scepticism level have remained as an obstacle for green purchase. Although the realization of green scepticism is on

the rise, there has been limited literature study in this topic of green scepticism. Hence, this serve as the motivation for this study to be carry out to discover what are the antecedents and consequences of green scepticism through the base of attribution theory.

Literature Review

Fritz Heider (1958) was the initial trigger for developing the Attribution Theory, citing Shakespeare and Ibsen formulating events and occurrence relating them to thoughts and behaviours. Heider (1958) has promptly interpreted events through intuitive measures in 'what if' cases. For example, Heider generates outcomes on what if Juliet's parents liked Romeo. The theory is then segregating behaviour attributes into external and internal factors. External factors are not accounted for when subject is failing in their goals when others are, likewise internal factors are not accounted as an attribute when subject is failing, and others succeed. From the extant analysis, a solid background on separation of locus from control, in which means separation of the two poles of locus control, internal and external attributions. Analysis laid out by Rotter shows that action does not constitute needs, incentives nor emotions, but rather analysis of determinants (success or failure) (Rotter, 1954).

There are two major factors pointed out when we dig deep into the behaviour component, the first is when a subject willingly chose to behave the way they behave, and the second is when a second-person perceive that the subject intended to behave the way they did. The theory now revolves around two deliberately condition in which external attribution that causing the subject to behave the way they did, and willingness internal attribution. The evolvement of conditions accommodates covariation theory in need of three different information. The first is consensus, distinctive and followed by consistency.

Performance determinants from Heider (1958) were ability, task difficulty and effort, in which ability and effort as internal while difficulty as external cause of an outcome. Rotter (1954) pointed out one of each internal and external cause of outcome, being skill (ability) and luck (chance) respectively. Weiner et al. (1971) formulated combinatory outcome determinants by integrating that of Rotter's and Heider's into four perceived cause of achievement outcomes – ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck in which two consists of two internal (effort and ability) and two external (task difficulty and luck).

According to Weiner et al. (1971), attributions are categorized along three causal dimensions of behaviour, namely locus of control, stability and controllability. Rotter's analysis of causal locus exudes determinants of outcomes (success or failure) to level of expectancies. The expectancy of failure will remain unchanged when the cause of an outcome is external, whereas, the expectancy of success will drop when failure is attributed to the internal cause of outcome. Weiner et al. (1971) stated that the locus of control is not a linear correlation between expectancy and internal and/or external causes of success and/or failure, as some external causes (bad luck/harsh teacher) of outcomes will largely impact or have little affect towards expectancy of failure.

Weiner's acknowledged a characteristic of locus that is influenced by expectancy shifts which is causal stability. When the cause of outcomes are subject to change in the future, the expectancy of failure will be unchanged. Inversely, when the cause of failure is unchanged, then the failure will produce an upward shift in expectancy (Weiner et al., 1971).

While the function of causal locus is expectancy/value, the expectancy shifts are systematically related to causal stability, and guided by Atkinson's, value is linked to the desired experience of pride in which internal causes of success will contribute to greater pride than external causes of success. Weiner acknowledge locus-pride relation suggesting a perception of causal locus is the mediator that supports task difficulty to pride. Higher difficulty task will more likely exude higher pride in accomplishment.

From the classical research on attribution theory (Kelley, 1973), the three major dimensions are distinctiveness, consensus and consistency. Consensus pronounces as subject who have similar or different behavioural patterns in same situation. Situational attribution can be formulated if a subject reacts differently in one situation compared to other situations, in other words, low consensus, which would indicate that there was more than one behavioural response in given situation. On the other hand, high consensus will indicate all behavioural responses are similar. Distinctiveness is the extent to which the subject reacts in similar manner to other different events or circumstances. In other words, distinctiveness propagates an occurrence whether or not the occurred situation is peculiar enough to have caused the behaviour. Consistency shows to which a subject behaves the same way in every time and situation. At a future standpoint, the information accountable is whether or not the subject has reacted the same in the past.

In this study, there are three parts involved which are attribution formation, attribution and attribution consequences. In attribution formation, the consensus is referred as green norms, distinctiveness is CSR belief and consistency is green history. In attribution, it includes the intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Where else, the attribution consequences are green scepticism and green purchase intention. As green skepticism may adversely affect consumers' purchase intention, there is dire need for better understanding of how consumer green skepticism influences green purchase intention. This study intends to answer the following research questions:

1. Do attribution formation aspects influence the attributions of why the firm markets green products?
2. Do attributions of why the firm markets green products influence consumer green scepticism?
3. Does green scepticism influence green purchase intention?

Generally, the aim of this study is to enhance the understanding of the consumer green scepticism role in the context of green products. Specifically, the research objectives are as below:

1. To examine the influence of attribution formation aspects towards the attribution of why the firm markets green products.
2. To examine the influence of the attributions of why the firm markets green products towards green scepticism.
3. To examine the influence of green scepticism towards green purchase intention.

Green norms entail socialisation of an organisation within its institutional environment (Colwell & Joshi, 2013). The term of green norms is associated with normative isomorphism. Normative isomorphism occurs as a result of professionalisation, which is defined as "the

collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the working conditions and their methods to work and in future guide the future professionals through legitimacy” (Liang et al., 2007). It is dependent on the extent where change in firm behaviour results in greater level of ‘legitimacy’ and are related to the willingness of firms to respond to external pressures for better environmental commitment (Zhu & Sarkis, 2007). The study of normative isomorphism are very much on the green supply chain practices whereby the competitors and industry associations are part of the external forces that contributes to firm’s decision in adopting green practices. Shall the firms want to be perceived as legitimate and professional in handling its responsibilities, firms will engage in green practices where it is driven by industry associations and competitive pressures (Barreto & Baden-Fuller, 2006; Ketchen & Giunipero, 2004). There were also studies of normative forces in the information system context where the firms’ have the desire to share the same set of green information system initiatives as competitors in the industry. This could result to a new norm of green information system to spread across the industry and the firms that do not follow will be left out (Wang et al., 2015). The firms, who do not wish to be shunned, lose market shares or reduction in their legitimacy, will be motivated to follow the norms. The stronger the relations between firms, the more mature the organisational network is. Such relationship will develop shared beliefs, where firms will behave in an identical way resulting to a stronger normative force. The study of Yang (2018), in the context of container shipping company also shows that institutional forces also comprise of normative forces has a positive force on internal green practices.

CSR can be defined as a “corporation’s voluntary social initiatives over and beyond its legal obligations, in an effort to enhance the overall well-being of society” (Schuler & Cording, 2006). Firms that have strong market recognition of CSR will receive positive responses from the customers in the form of favourable attitude, willingness to pay premium prices (Sen et al., 2006), loyalty and purchasing behaviour among others (Schramm-Klein et al., 2013; Ooi et al., 2022). The external competitive pressures and increased of awareness among firms on the impact of business practices on society has led to a new understanding of CSR. Hence, firms had begun to focus and incorporate socially responsible activities as their business practices in addressing social responsibility issues (Ooi et al., 2022). CSR has become an important component of business strategy which emphasises transparency, responsiveness and accountability. Therefore, this is portrayed as CSR Belief. CSR Belief refers to a consumer’s overall assessment of the extent to which a firm is socially responsible (Du et al., 2007). It is supported by Sen et al. (2006), where it states that the precondition for consumers’ beliefs on whether the firm is socially responsible is their awareness of the firms’ philanthropic initiatives. The study on corporate associations held by consumers, much research has attested to the pivotal role of consumers’ beliefs about the extent to which a company/brand is socially responsible (CSR beliefs) in their reactions to CSR. Currently, CSR belief acts as an intangible evaluation cue which would influence the consumers’ evaluations of the company and its products (Schramm-Klein et al., 2013).

Green history is derived from the literature in a different term known as consistency. In this study, focuses are on the green history whether firms practices green initiatives in a consistent manner. Consistency refers to the degree to which the firm in question displays a stable, repeated behavior in the domain of interest across time (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). The study of consistency is better developed in the similar but distinct area of CSR, but it is still highly applicable in the green practices. If CSR consistency is high, the presented information among CSR activities is easily integrated and positively evaluated, where else, a lack of

consistency due to contrast among suggested information leads to more thought and elaborate thinking by consumers, and finally lead to a negative response (Sengupta & Johar, 2002). This could be concluded in relation to green aspects is where, shall the firm be consistent in launching and engaging with green initiatives, then consumers would evaluate the firm positively by improving the environmental behaviour and sustainable action, in supporting the firms' initiatives. Contrarily, shall there is no consistency of green practices or development in the firms' initiatives, then the consumers would portray a less favourable response to the firms' green initiatives. CSR support is an important variable of consumer's evaluation where arguments are made that CSR activities in important areas are making consumers share their interest with the firm, leading to positive firm evaluations and purchase intentions (Sen et al., 2006). However, the effects of CSR consistency have yet to be sufficiently investigated and could be further explore in the nearby future.

Figure 1 presents the research framework of this study.

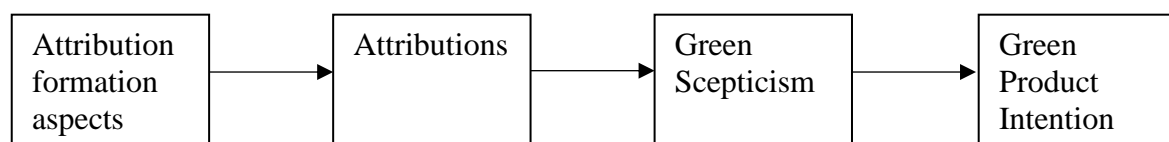


Figure 1: Research Framework

Research Method

This paper addressed the green scepticism research gap through synthesising the available literature and proposed a model to understand the link between green scepticism and green purchase intention. Based on the attribution theory, the proposed model is outlined, and it lay out the theoretical foundation for the subsequent empirical analysis. The aim of the present study is to examine the attribution formation aspects influence the attributions in creating green scepticism which eventually influence green product purchase intention. The literature review was used to find the existing gap in the literature, to explore and define variables, and to develop the hypotheses. The theoretical research framework considers attribution formation aspects as the independent variable. In this study, attribution formation aspects have been classified as a higher order construct and it is a reflective measure. The measurement applied for attribution formation aspects are green norms, green history and CSR belief. This study aims to examine attribution formation aspects and its relationship with attributions and green scepticism, and its influence on the green purchase intention. All the variables are measured in a five Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5)". The data will be collected by using online questionnaires. Partial least square (PLS) will be applied to test the cause-effect relationship among the research variables. Of late, many social science studies have used PLS for regression analysis, including Yeap et al. (2021) and Gim et al. (2022).

Sampling is process of selecting a sufficient number of right elements from the population so that a study of the sample and an understanding of its properties or characteristics of the population. This study will apply non-probability sampling (purposive sampling technique) in collecting the data. The minimum sample size required will be based on G*Power 3.1.9.2 software estimation to ensure sufficient statistical power. Many social science studies have

used G*Power for minimum sample size estimation, including Yeap et al. (2021) and Ooi et al. (2022).

Discussion

The level of green scepticism of the consumers would affect the purchase intention on the particular green products. In the case where consumers doubt about the benefits and reality of green products, it would decrease the willingness to buy those products (Leonidou & Skarmas, 2017). According to Goh and Balaji (2016) and Leonidou and Skarmas (2017), consumers make green purchasing decisions are either based on the level of compromise required to purchase a green product or by confidence level in the product. A confident consumer would believe the product's green claim. Contrarily, when the consumer doubt on the green products, they are more likely to evaluate those products less favourably (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Leonidou & Skarmas, 2017).

Conclusion

Overall, this paper attempts to provide a holistic understanding of the link between green scepticism and green purchase intention from the perspective of attribution theory. In a nutshell, the propositions of this study argue that the attribution formation aspects influence the attributions in creating green scepticism which eventually negatively influence green purchase intention. Given the severity of the climate change and environmental concern, it would seem prudent for businesses, as well as the consumers to behave in a responsible way. If the propositions are proven to be valid, then it would be crucial for the marketing practitioners to continuously facilitate and proactively engage in green marketing. Taken all together, there is an urgent need for businesses and policy makers to work hand in hand substantively in pursuit of sustainable development goals.

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