

Exploring the Influence of Green Transparency on the Purchase Intention of Green Products

Gen LI

University of Essex
gl19837@essex.ac.uk

Amir HOMAYOUNFARD

University of Essex
ahomay@essex.ac.uk

Maged A A ALI

University of Essex
maaali@essex.ac.uk

Abstract

The issue of greenwashing has raised consumers' suspicion towards green brands and created a negative impact on the authenticity of green brands (Chen and Chang, 2013). There has also been a growing demand for green brand authenticity at a broader level, which has become an essential criteria for choosing green brands (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Ewing, Allen and Ewing, 2012). Prior research has explored different dimensions of brand authenticity within different contexts including fashion (Choi et al., 2015) and fast moving consuming goods (FMCG) (Beverland, 2006). Different capacities of brand authenticity including brand extension authenticity (Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravella, 2012), consumer-brand authenticity (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland and Farrelly, 2014), and service brand authenticity (Daugstad and Kirchengast, 2013) have also been explored. Despite recent development of the prior literature, our understanding of green brand authenticity with regards to consumers' purchase intention remains limited. This study seeks to gain insights into the puzzle of green brand authenticity and its influence on consumers' purchase intention. It contributes to the extant body of the literature by providing an authenticity perspective for understanding consumers' response to green brands. Building on theory of planned behavior, our framework will explore the impact of green brand transparency on the green brand authenticity.

Keywords: Green brand, brand authenticity, purchase intention, green transparency, theory of planned behavior.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

The growing rise in demand and consumption of green products has led to firms increasingly utilising green brand to derive competitive advantage and brand benefits (Chen and Chang, 2013). Compared to conventional brands, green brands have offered higher environmental protection and energy efficiency and while consisting a series of green attributes and benefits, which appeals to consumers' purchase preference. According to European Commission (2013), 77% of EU respondents are willing to pay more for environmental protection products if they are assured of the environmental friendly-attributes of the products; however, only 55% of EU citizens are aware of the environmental impact of products they use and purchase. However, not all companies are sincere to cultivate green brands, as there is a growing concern about firms adopting greenwash strategies to acquire financial return (Rahman, Park and Chi, 2015). Consequently, greenwash issues dampen honest organizations' green investment initiatives, raise consumers' scepticism towards green brands, and have a negative influence on green brand authenticity (Nguyen, Yang, Nguyen, Johnson and Cao,

2019). As such the demand for green brand authenticity is increasing substantially at a wider level and has become an essential criteria to choose green brand.

Authenticity is a new perspective to alleviating negative cognition towards brands (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003). However, green brand market is glutted with various green clues and green claims, the kind of obscure information that increases consumers' identification difficulty and choice cost (Papista and Krystallis, 2013). A brand may carry out green claims and act in sustainable manner, but it does not necessarily mean it is viewed as a green brand. Opaque clues of green brands have been bothering consumers (Sahoo, Lenka and Pradhan, 2017). Green transparency is beneficial for consumers to understand the environmental performance, green practice and products features of green brands (Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008). Thus, green transparency is necessary for consumers to weaken the green brand confusion and enhance the green brand authenticity perception (Lin, Lobo and Leckie, 2017).

Green brand is an enduring concern (Olsen, Slotegraaf and Chandukala, 2014). Researchers have attempted to investigate the factors of enhancing the green purchase intention from brand-based perspective (Huang, Yang and Wang, 2014). The role of green brand values and costs and green brand equity in willingness to pay, consumers' green perceived value, green brand benefits and green brand image in purchase behavior response are investigated (Papista and Krystallis, 2013; De Medeiros, Ribeiro and Cortimiglia, 2016; Esmaeili et al, 2017; Lin et al., 2017; Li, Li and Sun, 2019). However, there is a paucity of research which investigates the impact in the context of green brand authenticity. As such, this research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the impact of green transparency on green authenticity ?

RQ2: What is the direct or indirect effect of green authenticity on customers' purchase intention?

Therefore, we answer calls for research regarding green transparency (Lin, Lobo and Leckie, 2017) and seek to contribute to improving the understanding in this area. The purpose of this study is firstly to identify the underlying dimensions of green brand authenticity in the context of green air conditioning brands and contribute to research content by integrating green brand benefits with corporate green practice of providing transparent environmental clues, which combine transparency with authenticity in the context of green brand. This study filled the gap to explore the influence of green transparency on green brand authenticity. It is beneficial to improve the theory about the antecedents of green brand authenticity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Green transparency and green brand authenticity

Transparency has always been a hot topic in various fields (Khosroshahi, Rasti-Barzoki and Hejazi, 2019). Although the application of transparency in the research of corporate sustainability and environment related topics has increased in recent years, but the research is still limited (Khosroshahi et al., 2019). However, these studies show the importance of transparency and its high impact on consumer behavior and manufacturers' environmental attitudes. In the existing literature, transparency plays an important role in the sustainable development of enterprises. Environmental transparency has been proved to have a positive impact on willingness of customers to participate in environmental programs (Vaccaro and Echeverri, 2010), customers' willingness to pay (Egels-Zandén and Hansson, 2016; An, 2013), CSR concerns of enterprises and local governments (Haddad, 2015), environmental performance of companies (Arena, Bozzolan and Michelon, 2015), production of green products (Li and Li, 2012), and financial performance (Shvarts, Pakhalov and Knizhnikov, 2016).

"Green visibility", that is, "green can be seen" is significantly related to consumer loyalty (Brick, Sherman and Kim, 2017). Hence, green brands should convey transparent green information to win targeting consumers than alternative brands. Green transparency refers to the behaviors that a green brand embodies explicit information about environmental policy and its honest clarification of the environmental impact on its production process. transparency influences not only environmental behavior but also company–stakeholder relationships (Vaccaro, 2010). Green transparency is beneficial for green brands to communicate their green values by improving the transparency of sustainability related information as well as the real motivation of green practice, which is the key to enhance consumers' perceived authenticity. Kim et al. (2016) suggest that consumers tend to perceive authenticity when an identity is communicated clearly or in a way that is consistent with experiential truth from the consumer's viewpoint. In other words, if a green brand presents detailed and transparent information, consumers tend to believe that the brand is "true" or at least perceived authentic beneficial to the environment.

2.2 Green brand authenticity

The word "authenticity" originated from the Greek *authentikos*, which is a credible alternative. Kennick (1985) described it as authenticity, Steiner and Reisinger (2006) observed that when consumers associate authenticity with their identity, authenticity will produce corresponding results. In the early stage, it can be said that authenticity is a much more complex phenomenon than the simple fact of being genuine or original (Alexander, 2009). When authenticity is introduced into the field of marketing, it has been widely proved to play a prominent role in consumer behavior and corporate brand building (Hernandez-Fernandez and Lewis, 2019).

The authenticity of green brand is the focus of brand management research at home and abroad (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010; Ewing, Allen and Ewing, 2012; Li, Li and Sun, 2019). It refers to consumers' subjective perception and evaluation of green brand on the basis of its inherent attributes and their own experience and knowledge (Chin et al, 2019). With the emergence of brand authenticity, scholars began to explore the dimensions of brand authenticity from different categories and perspectives (Eggers et al, 2013; Morhart et al, 2014; Napoli et al, 2014). Beverland (2006) put forward the dimensions of brand authenticity in the study of the authenticity of high-end red wine brands, including: Heritage and pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality commitments, relationship to place, method of production, downplaying commercial initiatives. Eggers et al (2013) explores the relationship between brand authenticity and the brand growth of small and medium-sized enterprises from the perspective of CEO, and believes that the dimensions of brand authenticity include brand consistency, brand consistency, customer orientation. Napoli et al (2014) constructed the measurement method of brand authenticity from the perspective of consumers, and believed that brand authenticity was influenced by heritage, quality commitment and severity.

Previous studies have shown that brand authenticity has an impact on consumers' brand identity (Brown, 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravela, 2012), brand trust, brand attachment and word-of-mouth recommendation (Assiouras et al., 2015; Morhart et al, 2015; Choi et al., 2015), and purchase intention (Plevoets and Cleempoel, 2011). More than that, the improvement of the authenticity of green brand can not only improve the organizational performance (Cason and Gangadharan, 2002) and shape the brand image (Li, Li and Sun, 2019), but also affect the relationship between consumers and green brand, indirectly affecting consumers' purchase behavior. The perception degree of brand authenticity elements (quality commitment, sincerity and inheritance, etc.) will affect the enthusiasm of word-of-mouth recommendation (Jasmina ilicic, etc., 2014; Morhart et al, 2015; Xu Wei, 2015). Chen Weijun

and Sun Xixiang (2017) took green cosmetics as an example to study the impact of real sensuality of green brands on consumers' purchase intention, and found that real sensuality of green brands (including green attribute, integrity, quality assurance, cultural heritage, etc.) can directly affect consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, under the influence of relevant government regulations, the authenticity of green brand will be improved accordingly, which will affect consumers' trust, emotion and value perception to the brand, and then affect consumers' purchase behavior, so as to promote the transition of the relationship between consumers and green brand. Portal, Abratt and Bendixen (2019) confirm that brand authenticity does have a direct impact on brand trust, while enthusiasm and ability to a certain extent regulate the relationship between brand authenticity and brand trust. By discussing how to establish and maintain brand authenticity, Athwal and Harris (2018) found that brand authenticity will lead to brand integrity with the development of brand through rich product expansion strategies.

At present, the research highly recognizes that brand authenticity has an important impact on customer behavior and the relationship between consumption and brand (Portal S, Abratt R, Bendixen M, 2019; Li, Li and Sun, 2019). In recent years, "green wash" has happened frequently (Rahman, Park and Chi, 2015). When consumers doubt the authenticity of such "green brands", their "green wash" behavior will affect the reputation and financial performance of enterprises (Walker and Wan, 2012). Moreover, once consumers are skeptical or distrustful of the brand, it will directly affect consumers' perception of corporate behavior motivation, and then affect consumers' purchase behavior (Jahdi, Acikdilli, 2009; Parguel, etc., 2011). Frequent occurrence of "green wash" phenomenon, lack of third-party certification, and consumers' inability to perceive the environmental friendliness and resource saving characteristics of green brands that cause the public to have doubts about the green attributes of green products, and the root cause of such doubts is the public trust of consumers to green products (Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004). It can be seen that green brands have to improve the authenticity of their own brands in order to gain consumers' trust and brand reputation.

2.3 Brand relationship quality

With the development of relationship theory and brand personification, consumer brand relationship has become a hot issue in brand management research. Blackstone (1992) first put forward the concept of consumer brand relationship, which is the interaction between the attitude of consumers to the brand and the attitude of the brand to the consumer. Consumers and brands can establish a similar interpersonal relationship (Fournier, 1998). The relationship between consumers and brands has changed the research of brand management from the traditional level of brand cognition to the level of brand relationship, breaking through the limitations of traditional brand concepts such as brand attitude on the research of brand management. Brand relationship quality was found quality includes six dimensions: interdependence, personal commitment, love and passion, self-connection, intimacy, partner quality (Fournier, 1998). The concept and structure of brand relationship quality provide the basis and reference for the research of the theory of consumer brand relationship, and develop the relevant concrete structures, such as self brand connection (Harrigan et al, 2018), brand satisfaction (Saragih et al, 2019), brand commitment (Das et al, 2019; Kang and Hur, 2012), brand love (Huang, 2017), brand attachment (Japutra, Ekinci and Simkin, 2019), which are used to describe, abstract and summarize the green brand relationship of consumers. The concept of the relationship between consumers and green brand deepened people's understanding of the theory of brand relationship, and further enhanced the practicability and operability of the scale of the relationship between consumers and green brand.

Most empirical research results confirm that the quality of brand relationship plays a positive role in maintaining the relationship between consumers and brands (Adhikari and Panda, 2019), reducing the tendency to exit the relationship (Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2014), positive word-of-mouth (Leventhal, Wallace, Buil and de Chernatony, 2014), relationship continuity (Kim and Cha, 2002), brand co-creation (Kaufmann, Loureiro and Manarioti, 2016) and brand loyalty (Kaufmann et al, 2016). Nowadays, most managers pay more attention to the construction of brand relationship quality, because it can not only improve the financial performance of enterprises (Dessart, Veloutsou and Morgan-Thomas, 2015), but also improve the willingness of consumers to forgive the brand (Hegner, Fenko and Teravest, 2017).

3. Conceptual framework

As shown in Figure 1, there are four major dimensions of green brand authenticity (i.e. stylistic, quality, heritage and sincerity). Green transparency is postulated to have direct effects on green brand authenticity. Green brand authenticity and brand relationship quality is expected to play a mediating role between the green transparency and green brand purchase intention.

Crowther and Martinez (2004) argued that sustainability, accountability and transparency are the important aspects of corporate management. Transparency has previously been widely discussed in many fields. In the field of public management, the improvement of transparency is believed to promote the credibility of the government sector and thus improve citizen participation behavior (da Cruz et al., 2016). In the field of organizational management, it is considered to improve corporate social responsibility and affect organizational performance (Arena, Bozzolan and Michelon, 2015; Shvarts, Pakhalov and Knizhnikov, 2016). In the field of marketing, transparency can improve brand image and increase consumers' purchase intention (An, 2013). Some steps and methods to improve transparency were identified by Galera, de los Ríos Berjillos, Lozano and Valencia (2014). Green transparency is based on the evolution of transparency, it refers to the green brand indicate their green attribute in products or advertisements, or disclose their environmental friendly production processes to the public (Lee and Chen, 2019; Eggert and helm, 2003). Generally, the price of products with green attributes is higher than that of general products. Providing consumers with more information about green attributes will promote their recognition of consuming green products. Consequently, customers will use the available information they receive to evaluate the authenticity of the product and make a purchase decision. (Lee and Chen, 2019).

Authenticity is defined as the consumer experience of real consumption (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010). It can be based on sincerity, innocence and originality (Fine, 2003), or simplicity, honesty and nature. It may be related to the authenticity of an object or experience (Grayson and Martinec, 2004). Brand authenticity can be divided into indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity from consumer perspective, so is green brand authenticity. For example, green brands improve consumers' perception of brand authenticity through green labels (indexical authenticity), organic packaging materials and green product certification (iconic authenticity). Through the distinction of authenticity, we can enhance our understanding of the formation process of authenticity, especially make a significant contribution to promoting the purchase intention of consumers (Fritz, Schoenmueller and Bruhn, 2017). Authenticity is always what consumers want because it runs through all aspects of people's lives (O'Neill et al., 2014). Such as goods and services (Liang, Choi and Joppe, 2018; Grayson and Martinec, 2004), food and beverage (Beverland et al., 2008), tourism (Park, Choi and Lee, 2019; Domínguez-Quintero, González-Rodríguez and Paddison, 2020), subcultures (Fuist and McDowell, 2019), Green brand (Ewing, Allen and Ewing, 2012) and advertising (Chiu et al., 2012). Brand authenticity is important in the understanding of brand-customer relationship (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019). Majority studies have shown that brand authenticity has

an impact on the relationship between brand and consumers. Such as, consumers' brand identity (Brown, 2013; Spiggle, Nguyen and Caravela, 2012), brand trust, brand attachment and brand purchase intention (Lu, Gursoy and Lu 2015)

According to Fournier's (1994) description, brand relationship quality, as a measure of brand equity based on consumers, reflects the strength and development ability of continuous connection between consumers and brands (Hudson, Roth, Madden and Hudson, 2015). Customers can develop relationship with brands when they interact with them, like getting along with friends (Hudson et al., 2015). The relationship between consumers and brands can be positive or negative like interpersonal relationship. Consumers can express their opinions, attitudes and feelings towards the brand. However, having a positive or negative view or feeling about the brand does not mean that consumers will be willing to interact with the brand and build relationships. The intensity of this relationship is determined by the degree of consumer enthusiasm for the brand (Sternberg, 2004). Therefore, when consumers have a strong relationship with the brand, they will abandon other brands. Brand relationship quality brings many positive results on the individual level, such as satisfaction (Wallace, Builand de Chernatony, 2014), brand loyalty (Kaufmann et al, 2016), value co-creation (Kaufmann et al, 2016), brand trust (Morhart f et al, 2015) and brand purchase intention (Lee and Kang, 2012).

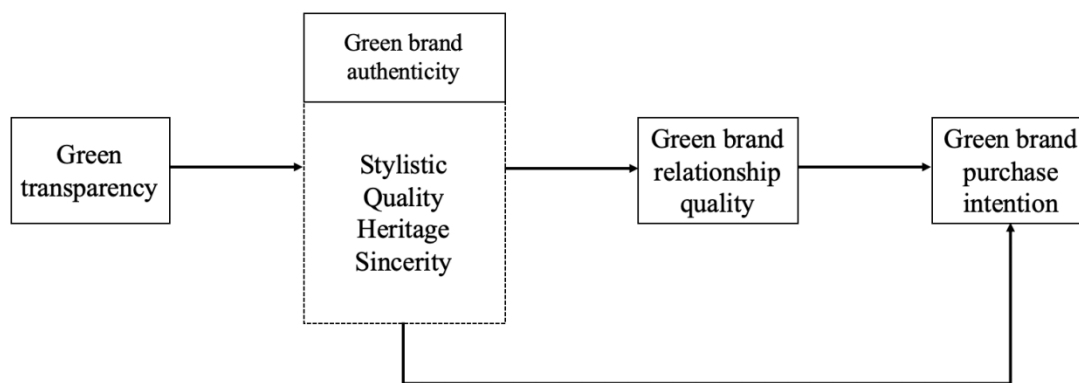


Figure 1. Framework of the research

4. Potential managerial implication and conclusion

This work investigates the effect of green transparency on green brand authenticity and consumers' perception of the brand authenticity, in turn, their purchase intention of green brand. The findings provide several insights, not only for academics but also for marketing practice. First of all, brand managers should understand what green attributes are, and accurately identify which green attribute transparency is the most concerned by consumers, and undertake their social and ecological responsibilities to increase consumers' perception of authenticity (Trang, Lee and Han, 2019). Secondly, Our findings may encourage green brands to concrete specific guidelines, help green brands effectively improve the green transparency of products, and increase consumers' perception of authenticity (Pelet, Durrieu and Lick, 2020; Riefler, 2020; Lin, Lobo and Leckie, 2017). the green brand authenticity is a powerful tool (Portal, Abratt and Bendixen, 2019; Beverland, 2005). Enterprises can use it to reduce the gap between consumers' green demand and enterprises' green products. Brand managers should provide sincere and effective communication, transfer the green attributes of products to consumers to enhance the effectiveness and authenticity of green brand communication, so as to be trusted by consumers (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016). Third, brand managers should pay attention to the fact that improving the transparency of green clues and green certification is helpful to enhance the green brand authenticity, so as to improve the behavior results of green brands (Ewing, Allen

and Ewing, 2012; Starr and Brodie, 2016). When consumers believe that the green brand is authentic, consumers are more likely to establish a strong connection with the green brand, as well as the purchase intention of the green brand (Plevoets and Cleempoel, 2011). Therefore, enterprises should make use of reasonable green marketing mix, establish green brand relationship, improve the quality of green brand relationship, and enhance consumers' long-term willingness to cooperate.

In 2019, the industrial production of air conditioners in China had amounted to about over 218 million units (Samantha W, 2020). Although affected by the downturn in the real estate market in recent years, but with the promotion of smart home system and the rise of overseas markets, the future growth space of China's air conditioner shipments is still worthy of expectation. This study focuses on the impact of green transparency on the green brand authenticity, the impact of green brand authenticity on the purchase intention of green brand, and the intermediate effect of the green brand relationship quality between the green brand authenticity and the purchase intention of green brand for environmental protection and energy-saving air conditioning products. From the previous research, we have reason to believe that green transparency has a significant positive impact on the four different measurement methods of green brand authenticity. The green brand authenticity will also have a direct impact on the purchase intention of green brand. In addition, the green brand authenticity indirectly affects the purchase intention of green brand through the green brand relationship quality.

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