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Green positioning: succeed with right content messages a review

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper summarises arguments and findings pertaining to the impact of green product positioning strategies upon green perception. Substantive literature supports that the legitimacy of green claims is enhanced by combined use of definitive (rational) and symbolic (emotional) claims. The emotional and rational responses vary in their impact time period. Consumers have the environmental consciousness/attitude but fail to reflect it in their actions/behaviour. This attitude/behaviour gap exists due to lack of confidence in environmental claims. Also the role of regulatory authority in scrutinizing the form and content of green messages is important in eliminating deceptive claims. Legitimate green claims enhance green purchase confidence among consumers already possessing environment values. This paper is divided into five parts. Part I discusses elements of green positioning. Part II throws insight into how green perception determines the green consumer's buying behaviour, part III sums up the ineffectiveness of green positioning strategies and discusses possible reasons for the behaviour- action gap. Part IV gives possible outcomes of this study in context to green positioning and its impact on psychographics and part V concludes and offers possible insights into better positioning, future marketing and academic prospects in the field of green content promotion.

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Introduction

Environmental concern has phased through 1960s till the present date. With initial concern focusing on pollution/ environment degradation and energy conservation, the current inclination is towards marketing ecological products for competitive advantage in business and politics in response to individual and societal concerns. The increase in academic research on green issues also added to development of environmental sensitivity in the general public. This increased social and political pressure has shifted companies beyond simply addressing pollution and waste disposal to looking for alternative package composition/design, alternative product formulations, and cause-related promotion in an effort to be in sync with the environment. It was in the late 1990's that academicians and researchers saw "green" as an important area of research. For businesses to remain competitive environmental strategies (right from product to promotion) should be inculcated.

Green motivation develops through good attitude towards the environment and social responsibility that people can relate to. Effective and favourable green purchase behaviour is dependent upon green attitude, green awareness and knowledge about environmental issues. Changing people's attitudes towards ecological behavior should firstly aim at understanding attitude constructs. Pro-environmental behavior that an individual already possesses can be enhanced by positive positioning contents suited to the audience (whether rational or emotional) to have a heightened pro-environmental decision making. The purchase intention for eco-friendly product is governed by concern for the consequences of the purchase on the environment, environmental awareness. Positioning favourably helps an individual to perceive himself/herself as an environmental person and in addition increase the moral obligation to safeguard environment.

But this does not sideline the very interest of personal benefit which should be brought to forefront. Also bringing attention towards environment friendly behaviour that people already possess evokes greater feeling to get involve into such behaviour. In short consistent and continuous reinforcement of self values should be provided for encouraging green purchase commitment among consumers.

Objectives of the study and methodology

The objective of the study is to analyze the role played by attitude of individuals in green/eco-friendly product purchase. It further tries to study the variations caused by emotional and rational content messages in influencing green purchase behaviour. The whole paper is based upon case studies, descriptive arguments and logical understanding gained through review of pertinent literature, research papers and online data base

Part I

Green Positioning

Placing a products green/ environment attributes in the minds of the prospective buyers entails green positioning. It is what is done to the "mind of the prospective buyer" and not "what is done to the product". Either placing products green features that are beneficial to the users or placing product by means of emotional affinity for the cause behind it or a mix of both. Better said in marketing language as positioning product by rationality or emotions portrayed.

Emotional Content: Evoking the Feelings

Individual's emotions being socially constructed prove to be a beneficial positioning tool. As these emotions evoke instant feeling of like or dislike for a brand and therefore marketers should make use of interpretive visual aids to generate positive emotional response. Also if necessary valid rational evidence should be attached to emotional construct to enhance its impact on purchase behaviour. Also it is important to carefully select strategies when marketing across culturally different regions and

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various target audiences due to varied perceived diagnosticity. **Williams Patti** (2000) concluded that diagnostic emotional appeal messages create a stronger positive purchase intention due to their greater impact upon the conscious or explicit memory. On the contrary the advertisements oriented towards non-diagnostic and irrelevant content of the product create weaker response towards the appeal.

Environmentally knowledgeable consumer being more positively inclined towards green purchase behaviour should be approached by means of emotional appeal messages. Individual's environment belongingness and outcomes of his/her actions on the environment affect the emotional affinity towards the environment **M.F.Shellyana Junaedi** (2007). This study further revealed causal relationship between environmentally conscious behaviour, environment awareness and environment knowledge. **Lukic and Flyholm** (2009) added an interesting observation of environmental issues being remotely connected to the individual as contrast to personal issues and paved the ground for justification of use of more positive emotional appeal messages rather than negative content messages. Their study also found the importance of using guilt appeal rather than fear appeal in social issue campaigns.

Also an important aspect that came out from the study was the easy non- acceptance of positive emotions due to lack of cognitive positive emotional experience portrayed in the advertisements. Companies targeting consumer's emotions using fear appeal majorly, proves to be a barrier.

Chen Rong, et al (2011) compared the effectiveness of emotional and rational appeals towards the purchase of carbon offset products with the former being a more suitable method of promotion. They advocated the use of varied forms of emotions embedded in the messages for better positioning as they significantly enhances the impact of ecological messages/information. According to the study, a consumer's emotional state and anticipation of emotions at a future time frame both form a deciding factor in ecologically conscious decision making. **Hasan Judianto. et. al** (2012) analysed environmental friendly product (EFP) purchase behaviour by making use of Structural Equation Modelling and concluded that emotional value added to the environmental messages enhance green perception. Significant outcomes of the study confirmed that an individual's personal characteristics and external stimuli largely affect the AIDA (awareness-interest- desire- action) parameters that one makes use of while making a product purchase. In addition to this for consumers, EFP's with legitimate green claims create better product selection owed to better informed consumers. As per results of the study green innovations should be in accordance to what consumers agree to as being emotionally environment friendly.

Reason to Buy: Rational Content

Downs C. Thomas (1992) describes the negative impact of vague green messages in creating confusion to the consumers as they are unsupported by rational or meaningful claim and thus appear deceptive to the audience. The study also discussed the impact of comparative and descriptive green claims upon consumer buying behaviour where the former being useful for products improvement and consumer awareness and later focusing on environment sustainability enhancement.). **Melody E. Schuhwerk and Roxanne L. Hagius** (1995) found that consumers with high degree of environment involvement showed least willingness and persuasion when targeted with green appeal messages as opposed to lesser involved consumers. Also for the non green appeals the content messages depicting cost saving attributes (rational) of the products were more

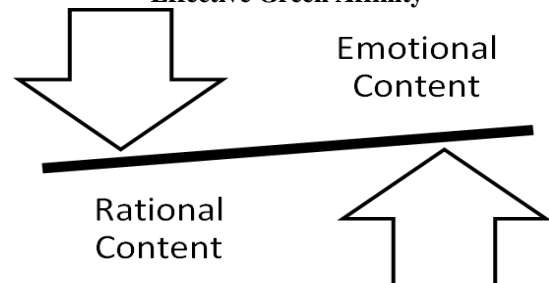
influential in contrast to green appeal messages that emphasized environmental (emotional) content.

In another revelation by **Carlson, et. al.** (1996) found that substantive ads due to their rational content appeal more to the environmentally aware consumers. According to them green positioning involves Approach-Response method wherein different positioning approaches followed generate most probable responses. The study also suggested that associative or emotional claims should not be positioned amongst environmentally conscious consumers, for them being more intangible in nature. **Chan Anthony** (2009) in his comparative study on emotional and rational claim messages found that for firms/companies it is beneficial to advertise CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) commitments based upon factual information i.e. Rational positioning and avoid strategizing upon consumer values(i.e. emotional positioning). For the cognition driven consumers with an attitude of "reality better than perception," they independently verify factual information out of emotions. These companies should make all possible efforts to avoid the damage caused to brand image by "Green washing" by not positioning emotionally.

Mixing emotions and rationale: The pros and cons

Researchers and academicians observed enhanced impact of green messages when rational and emotional appeals positioned together. **Williams Patti** (2000) found the comparative effect of emotional and rational appeals individually upon the implicit and explicit memory state of consumer mind (conscious and sub-conscious) frame and concluded that both (emotional and rational) content generate their respective response, hence a mix of both be included in the marketing positioning strategies. **Chan Anthony** (2009) also asserted that sole dependency on rational positioning may not deliver the desired effectiveness for the segment of consumers with "perception better than reality" attitude. **Bhat and Reddy** (1998) made an attempt to study the positioning variables and suggested that companies can position a brand as symbolic, rational or a mix of both as consumers perceive these as different brand concepts. They asserted that an individual brand can have both symbolic and functional meaning in the minds of the consumers. They further suggested the careful selection of multiple brand concepts that convey and match the required consumer needs.

Figure 1. Balance of Emotional and Rational Content for Effective Green Affinity



In another attempt to examine the impact of positioning on brand image through their study **Albers-Miller and Stafford** (1999) found that cultural and anthropological attributes determine the type of emotional and rational appeals to be used. This study also revealed the importance of positioning method (emotional/rational) and type of subject (product/service). Wherein for positioning of services, emotional construct play an important role due to intangibility of its content and for products; rational appeal serves the purpose by way of informing the consumer about the tangible contents of the product. The rational information in an advertisement helps in reducing doubts related to purchase. Also importance of

emotional positioning along with rational construct can't be negated. Further brand attitude formed due to interaction of emotional and rational constructs as relatively highly positive than, when these used individually. Environment consciousness and emotional attributes when positioned collectively create a stronger environment oriented perception. The communication planners should create messages that communicate real environment benefits along with emotional satisfaction **Hartmann Patrick, et. al.** (2005).

Berrone Pascual, et. al. (2009) showed that substantive actions (rational claims) share complementary relation with symbolic claims. A symbolic claim not always leads to green message acceptance i.e. emotions shown in the messages may sometimes lead to biasness due to emotional alienation with the message. As per the study the emotional and rational response vary in their impact time period, where former has short term impact and later has a lasting impact on the legitimacy of the green claims. Their result suggested that legitimacy of green claims is enhanced by the combined use of definitive and symbolic claims. **Mohammed Sohel Islam, et. al.** (2011) examined the consumer involvement with green messages and proposed that consumer involvement is important for environmental messages to have a lasting and positive impact. The information in the green advertisements is processed more effectively when consumer involvement and consumer attitude have a positive relation to with each other. They stated that rational and emotional appeals generate the respective desired attitudes if positioned and presented to right set of audience i.e. emotional appeal of fear, guilt positioned for emotions driven audience and rational appeal for cognition driven consumers.

Park et. al (1986) in an important revelation found that brand concept either symbolic or functional should be incorporated into the marketing mix independent of each other and be repositioned when required. They asserted the follow up of separate positioning strategies (each for symbolic or functional) for building brand image. A combination or mix of both leads to customer confusion as they are unable to relate brand to either their symbolic or functional needs.

Thus, the above studies on eco-friendly products positioning revealed that for positioning variable mix of emotional and rational appeals should be used keeping a note of the type of target consumers i.e. whether consumers are emotions driven or analytical/rational driven.

Part II

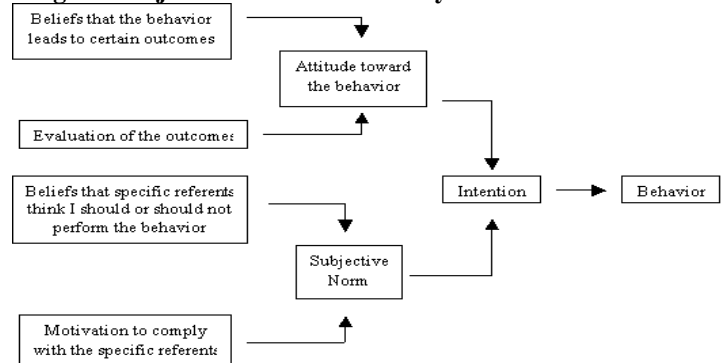
Green Perception & Buying Behaviour

Consumer's affinity towards environment and their rising interest in maintaining ecological balance can be used progressively to bring about changes in consumption behaviour in a more environment friendly manner. For the marketers it is important to be conversant with the green perception of consumers and strategize upon their marketing mix because perception (positive/negative) is crucial variable in buying behaviour for products. Environmentally conscious consumers look for the products produced in a sustainable way and spend money to enhance their personal health. Consumers with such an attitude to life are called LOHAS consumers (Lifestyle of health and sustainability) **Kotler et al 2009**.

The theory of planned behaviour proposed by **Ajzen and Fishbein (Fishbein, M. & Ajzen, I. (1975))** is the most influential models in predicting human behavior and behavioral dispositions. It describes how behavior is affected by behavioral intentions which, in turn, are affected by attitudes toward the act and by subjective norm. Perceived behavioral control is more important in influencing a person's behavioral intentions. The

attitude toward the act is a function of the perceived consequences people associate with the behavior. The subjective norm, is a function of beliefs about the expectations of important referent others, and an individual's motivation of complying with these referents.

Figure 2. Ajzen and Fishbein Theory of Planned Behaviour



(Source: Fishbein, M. & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research.*) Simplified version

Following fig;2 behavioral model and proposition, green consumption behaviour can be said to be guided by various attitudinal and perceptual transformations that an individual goes through before the final consumption. Green purchase behaviour is affected way too much by attitude and value orientation of consumer towards the product.

Kassarjian (1971) in an early attempt to study green perception and buyer reaction towards ecological advertisement and their attitude and perception for environment protection, concluded that green perception (positive/negative) is crucial variable in buying behaviour for green products. His study is considered to be important for the field of environmental conscious consumption behaviour. Further personality traits of an individual are better predictors of social conscious consumption. Minimal impact of behavioural, socio-economic and demographic variables was found on socially conscious consumption behaviour of consumers. Rather knowledge, values/attitude played a significant role in explaining ecologically friendly behaviour. **Frederick E. Webster, JR. (1975)**. The ecologically conscious consumers are self actualized such that they would act in a manner that not only satisfy their needs but also needs of others (society). This was revealed by parallels drawn between Maslow's Need Hierarchy theory and socially conscious consumption behaviour by **George Brooker (1976)**. The parallels further revealed that a self actualized individual becomes freer from self concerns.

Green consumers critically analyse the product/green options available to them and their thus formed perception determine their 'willingness to pay' premium price for such green products **Ian Rowlands et al (2002)**. Exploring consumer attitude and behaviour towards green products researchers arrived at for green consumer's tangible environment commitments significantly affect attitude / behaviour towards eco-friendly products/services. **Passent Tantawi et al (2009)** in an attempt to study green consciousness of consumers in developing country observed that attitude towards environment is an important determinant in environment sensitive behaviour. Another important outcome for the marketers from the study pertaining to green conscious consumer behaviour was, to analyze the 'change' in environment consciousness than environment consciousness itself. This provides a better understanding of the perception towards green products and further environmentally conscious purchase behaviour.

Clare D Souza et al (2009) brought to notice that consumer perception is determined majorly by those green brands which are known to them and which appear safe to use. Also as per the outcomes of the study consumers show a positive environmental attitude. For the marketers it is advisable to communicate descriptive green products labels as consumers show willingness to pay higher price provided quality is not compromised. **Mahmoud Manafi et al (2011)** found that demographic characteristics, psychographic characteristics and environmental knowledge are three major factors significantly affecting green consumer perception. According to them the demographic factor of age, income, gender have the strongest impact on green perception followed by psychographic variables and lastly by environmental knowledge.

Morteza Haghiri (2011) in his attempt to study Consumer perception of environment friendly products found that they are ready to purchase or show willingness to pay premium for green products which render them more of personal benefits as against environment. Further enhanced environmental awareness of the consumers creates greater positive purchase intentions. According to him demographic factors of marital status and higher education level share a positive relation with willingness to pay. **Ronnie Irawan and Dahlia Darmayanti (2011)** discussed that green purchase behaviour significantly affect environment oriented perceptual framework wherein environment responsibility and extent of seriousness of environmental issues formed the major part of it.

Also the consumers with high environment knowledge and environment concern did not translate it into their purchase intentions. They further concluded that gender has no major role to play in environmental concern, perceived seriousness and environment responsiveness. **Aysel Boztepe (2012)** concluded that green purchase behaviour relates positively with the price. For the companies it is important to set promotion, product and price features directed in relation to demographic characteristics as green promotional activities, green product features and green price significantly affect ecological conscious purchase behaviour. Importantly conversion of environmental consciousness into environmental action lacks mainly due to consumers risk perception. **Kaufmann H.R et al (2012)** in their study, "Factors affecting consumer's green purchasing behaviour: An integrated conceptual framework", concluded that demographic variables like age, income, education and occupation etc act as mediating variable between dependent (i.e. consumer green purchasing behaviour) and independent variable (i.e. environmental awareness and knowledge). According to them 8 set of independent variables considered for the study environmental knowledge, awareness, product availability, collectivistic behaviour, fair trade practices, environmental concern and attitude, availability of products and its safety and altruistic (selfless) behaviour have a greater impact on green purchase behaviour.

Laurent Bertrandis et.al (2012) in an effort to examine the effect of perceived environment harmfulness of consumer goods upon buying decision making, concluded that perceived harmfulness significantly affects product purchase choice. Further detailed information provided to the consumers through public and legitimate authorities would generate better acceptance of environmental message and also positive consumption behaviour in line with the aim of environment preservation. Another major finding through this study was the non-responsiveness of price sensitive consumers to such informative messages. In addition to the price, value and need of green buyers largely affect green purchase **Shila Shahnaei**

(2012) analysed the relationship between demographic characteristics and green purchasing of Malaysian consumers and revealed important results, of not all demographic variables to have been significantly affecting green purchase behaviour. According to the study educational differences among green consumers majorly affect green purchasing. The study involved consideration of three major demographic variables namely educational qualification, age and gender collected.

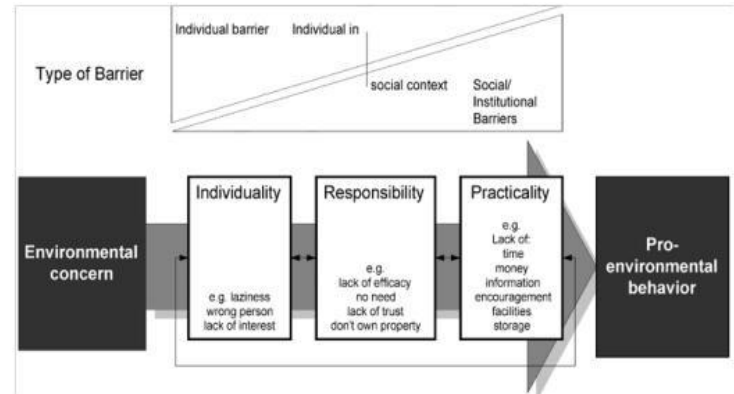
Part III

Behavior- Action Green GAP

Empirical evidences have revealed that there is quiet often a gap between environmental behaviour and actual purchase. Green consumers directly do not act upon the information they possess or acquire. Rather the environmental information shapes their attitudes which in turn lead to behavioural change dependent upon the information they acquire. **Pinar Basgoze and Ozgur Ozkan Tektas (2012)** found through their study that majority of the respondents have the environmental consciousness/attitude but fail to reflect it in their actions/behaviour. This attitude/behaviour gap exists due to lack of environmental knowledge. The negative environmental attitude is reflected in their behaviour by means of boycott campaigns towards the environmentally unethical firms.

Blake's model very conclusively portrays that if the consumer does not possess the individualistic or collectivistic responsibility traits required for green behavior, exposure to adequate information regarding a products green features would still not result in positive environmental attitude,. Consumers develop environmental attitude due to their individualistic traits.

Figure 3. Blake's Model on Environmental Concern and Action



Source: *Barriers between environmental concern and action* (Blake, 1999).

Roberts James and Bacon R. Donald (1997) in an attempt to explore the subtle relationship between environmental concern and ecologically conscious consumer behaviour developed New Environment Paradigm (NEP) scale with 12 factor variables to gather data pertaining to environmental concern and 30 item Environment conscious consumption behaviour (ECCB) scale to understand attitude- behaviour gap. These two scales when statistically analysed resulted in explaining the relation between environment concern and ECCB to be highly correlated. As concluded from the research general recycling behaviour and environment conscious decision making were the major factors influencing environmental concern. Another major finding was the positive impact of environment knowledge upon performance of environmental conscious behaviour. **Pasent Tantawi et al (2009)** lead to thought that consumers are concerned for the environment but that is not translated into their actual purchase actions due to lack of legitimate and descriptive environmental messages.

Darcie Honabarger (2011) found that there exists a conscious/action gap in the minds of consumers that describes the lack of translation of positive environment consciousness into actual purchase intent. This gap is assumed to be lesser for the consumers who have had positive past environment purchase experience. According to him accurate and reliable eco-labelling that represent products green characteristics, create better green attitude helps to translate green perception into actual purchase. The major blocks in green product purchase comes from functional attributes, cost and temporal risks associated with eco- friendly products **Durif et al (2012)**. The study revealed that temporal risks can be reduced by increasing the product coverage in terms of availability thereby reducing the perceived time barrier. Functional risk can be minimized by assigning descriptive labelling on the products.

Ooi Jen Mei et al (2012) in an attempt to study the antecedents of green purchase intention found that green purchase behaviour is direct outcome of consumers green attitude. In addition to this the role of government in promoting and rewarding green behaviour cannot be ignored. As per the study green purchase intention does not depend upon green attitude alone but also green awareness, peer pressure and government initiative. Added to this was the role of green labels in encouraging environmentally conscious consumption behaviour if not wholly to some extent. Further this study identified “value-action gap” amongst consumers i.e. positive green behaviour is no assurance to actual green product purchase.

It can be concluded that environmental attitude and value orientation has a positive effect on green perception and hence green purchase behaviour. Positive attitudes towards environmentally friendly products influence consumer's willingness to pay the price for environmentally friendly products and ultimately the intention to buy green products also increases. The more positive consumer awareness of the environment, and the higher the value orientation of consumers, the more positive the eco-friendly purchase behaviour will be. Green consumer's attitude and value based behaviour is an important marketing study area.

Part IV

Discussion & Suggestions

The review of the relevant literature suggests that environmental marketing and green consumption should be governed by social change and substitution in a phased manner. Green marketing should promise long term benefits by positive portrayal through marketing efforts in words and in deeds. Finally the reviews revealed that green purchase behaviour is affected way too much by knowledge of the product and the perception thus formed but this fails to reflect it in actual purchase behaviour. Companies marketing strategies emphasize on the negative impact of products on the environment. Therefore, companies/brands must invest in their brand positioning and market communication strategies to convert this negativity into an opportunity. The highlighting points in this review were:

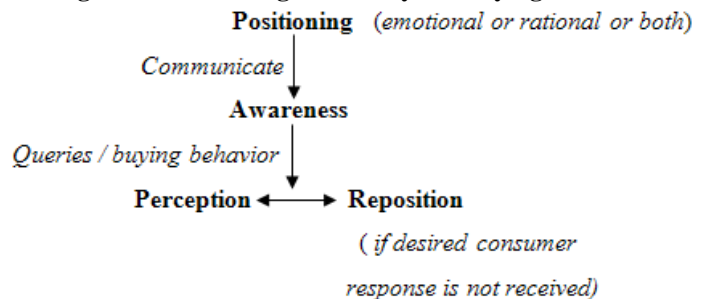
- * Individuals are emotionally charged, but not analytically in response to environmental advertisements.
- * Government should make regulations that limit what kind of environmental claims companies can have.
- * Informing people about the environment does not eliminate the green washing. Legislative assurance must be conferred upon so that consumers with environmental values can confidently choose green products.

*Subjective product knowledge acts as moderating variable between perceived behaviour and purchase intent, whereas attention to social comparison information (ATSCI) moderates relation between attitude and purchase intention.

* Psychographic attributes (i.e. attitude-perception) play a crucial role in creating ecologically conscious behaviour.

* Further for marketers it is important to translate their environmental commitments into actions as it creates confidence among consumers.

Figure 4. Positioning Paves way for Buying Intentions



* Also revealed from the study was the importance of descriptive labelling in reducing purchase uncertainty among consumers even when they possess eco-friendly product affinity.

* Positioning must be target audience oriented i.e emotionally driven consumers catered to with help of emotional content and rational by means of informative content. They being varied in their impact time period, where former has short term impact and later have a lasting impact on the legitimacy of the green claims.

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