

When buying in means selling out: Sustainable consumption campaigns and unintended uncivic boomerang effects

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A quick look at the shelves and web sites of stores today reveals an overwhelming array of green, environmentally friendly and sustainable product choices. From organic coffee and fair trade chocolate to electric cars and reusable water bottles: today's consumers have seemingly endless opportunities to communicate their environmental concern. Sustainable consumption – the conscious decision to buy or avoid products and services based on ethical, environmental, and/or political reasons [1] – represents an increasingly popular form of consumer behavior. In the area of environmentally motivated consumption (the most common form of sustainable consumption) the number of Americans who identify as green consumers has more than tripled over the last four years from 12% to almost 40% in 2014, the equivalent of about 98 million Americans [2].

This rise in environmentally motivated consumer choices is seen by many as a positive trend. Sustainable consumption is said to offer meaningful opportunities for individuals to effect social change, for example by supporting companies that take a vested interest in workers' rights. These sustainable consumption choices are seen as important ways for individuals to enact their environmental concern and to mitigate the impact of climate change [3,4]. For advertisers and marketers, campaigns promoting green and sustainable attributes, such as being made from recycled materials, are viewed as an effective way to connect with consumers by appealing to their broader, societal concerns [5]. Among political science scholars, the merging of civics and consumption is seen as a viable means of increasing civic engagement in an age of declining political participation [6,7].

Across the board, sustainable consumption is assumed to have a positive relationship with pro-social behaviors, especially civic and political engagement [1,8-10]. That is, it is seen as representing a salutary, alternative form of political participation, one that allows citizens to express and enact their civic norms and ideals outside the traditional bounds of the 'dutiful citizen' [11,12]. Yet sustainable consumption can also have a darker underside. Rather than representing an alternative but complementary form of political participation, sustainable consumption in some situations might instead foster antagonistic, uncivic attitudes and behaviors. As predicted by the theory of moral licensing [13], compared to non-sustainable consumers, individuals who make sustainable consumption choices give themselves license to subsequently make morally and socially deleterious choices. Being a sustainable consumer, then, can diminish the need to be civically minded in other domains. My study seeks to extend these findings on the unintended and socially *undesirable* consequences of sustainable consumption, specifically in the context of green consumption. To date, this avenue of research remains understudied.

Drawing on theories of moral self-regulation, moral licensing and regulatory fit, my study builds on past research that indicates individuals who engage in green consumption with pro-social consequences are subsequently more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors, such as lying, cheating and stealing [13-15]. My own research extends this work by taking into account the role played by political ideology, which so far has been missing from discussions about moral licensing and green consumption, but based on related work, ought to have a significant impact. For example, a limited number of studies has shown that conservatives and Republicans are

much less willing to engage in political consumption [16] and are less likely to believe in the risks and challenges posed by global warming [17]. In pilot studies, I have shown [18] that after exposure to messages about green consumption, liberals were less likely to engage in pro-social behaviors than conservatives. After reading persuasive messages about green products, liberals were also more likely than conservatives to choose profits over environmental protections in an environmentally focused business scenario. These results suggest that the salutary side effects of political consumption might hold only for conservatives whereas for liberals, the consequences might actually be greater uncivic orientations.

The study outlined here builds on this past work to examine the role played by message framing in campaigns promoting sustainable consumption. Specifically, this study explores the influence of congruency between political ideology and regulatory fit on attitudes toward climate change, green purchase intent and likelihood of engaging on moral licensing. Regulatory focus theory [19] argues that individuals have a specific way of viewing the world, either in terms of a promotion focus or a prevention focus. Promotion-focused individuals are motivated by achievement and opportunities for advancement; prevention-focused individuals are motivated to avoid threats and minimize risks. Advertising messages can highlight either prevention or promotion aspects of a product. Regulatory fit occurs when this frame is congruent with the message receiver's regulatory focus (i.e. a prevention-focused individual and a prevention-focused ad). In cases of regulatory fit, message persuasiveness is said to be augmented [20,21]. Past research indicates regulatory focus and political ideology are highly correlated, with conservatives tending to display a chronic prevention focus and liberals displaying a chronic promotion focus [22].

Drawing on this past work, this study relies on a 2 (political ideology: conservative v. liberal) x 2 (green advertising message's regulatory focus: prevention v. promotion) factorial design to see how regulatory fit influences a) support for climate change mitigation policies, b) intention to purchase green products and c) likelihood of engaging in moral licensing. Results show an interaction effect for political ideology and regulatory focus, such that frame congruence (liberal ideology and promotion frame or conservative ideology and prevention frame) leads to increased support for climate change mitigation policies and intention to purchase green products. However, results also show that frame congruence leads to greater moral licensing effects, such that when ideology is congruent with regulatory frame (i.e. liberals with promotion frame), participants are more likely to choose profits over environmental protections in an environmental business scenario. These results paint a complicated picture for the role of sustainable consumption and green advertising campaigns as a means of resolving issues related to climate change. On the one hand, campaigns promoting sustainable consumption can help increase support for climate change mitigation policies while fostering greater intentions to purchase green products. But there is also an inadvertent boomerang effect, whereby effective persuasive messages promoting sustainable consumption also have the unintended consequence of licensing environmentally deleterious, uncivic behaviors. These contradictory outcomes raise important questions about the role of sustainable consumption as a means of grappling with global climate change and suggest persuasive sustainable consumption campaigns can result in patterns that are both helpful and harmful, and might ultimately cancel each other out.

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