

## ***Buying Green: Consumer Behavior***

Green consumer products, such as organic food, fair trade coffee, or electric cars, represent a fast-growing segment of the consumer market. In the area of organic food alone, data from the Organic Trade Association reveals that consumer demand in the United States has seen double-digit growth every year since 1990. In 2014, the organic food market reached almost \$40 billion in sales. Consumers of these products tend to be seen in a more positive light—they are deemed more ethical, more altruistic, and kinder than people who do not buy green products. But is there another side to this kind of consumer behavior?

In a series of experiments comparing consumption of green and “conventional” products, psychologists Nina Mazar and Chen-Bo Zhong demonstrated that those people who bought green products—like eco-friendly laundry detergent or organic yogurt—were less likely to share money with a stranger, more likely to cheat on a task in which they could earn money, and more likely to steal money when they thought they would not get caught. As the psychologists stated, “purchasing green products may license indulgence in self-interested and unethical behaviors.”

Mazar and Zhong, whose study received considerable media attention in their native Canada, as well as in American and British publications, said the results surprised them. Initially, they expected green products to provide a halo effect, whereby the positive impressions associated with green consumption would lead to positive outcomes in other areas. “Given that green products are manifestations of high ethical standards and humanitarian considerations, mere exposure [to them would] activate norms of social responsibility and ethical conduct,” said Mazar and Zhong in an interview.

But as the results indicate, the opposite can be true. “The message of this research is that actions which produce a sense of self content and moral glow can sometimes backfire,” Mazar stated in another interview.

These patterns have been shown to extend to other shopping scenarios. For example, one study tracked scanner data and shopper receipts at a California grocery store. Those shoppers who brought reusable grocery bags with them were more likely to buy environmentally friendly products, like organic food. But they were also more likely to buy indulgent products, like ice cream, cookies, candy, and cake. The researchers followed up this study with a series of experiments that showed these moral licensing effects only happened when the decision to bring the reusable bags was at the shopper’s discretion. When shoppers were told that the store required customers to use cloth bags, licensing effects disappeared and customers chose not to buy indulgent products. Only when consumers felt like using cloth bags was their own idea did the moral licensing effects hold.



**Discussion Questions:**

1. Beyond green consumption, what other types of products might bring about similar kinds of moral licensing effects? Can you think of instances in your own life when your purchase choices have licensed you to make decisions that were less than ethically ideal? Explain.
2. Do you think these moral licensing effects are common across all kinds of green consumers? Or are there other factors (i.e. demographics, psychographics) that might either exacerbate or weaken the effects? Why or why not?
3. The authors of the study, Mazar and Zhong, initially thought green consumption would have a positive spillover effect and encourage positive behaviors. Why do you think they found the opposite?
4. What steps do you think can be taken to help minimize or mitigate these types of moral licensing effects among green consumers? Explain.
5. If you were the brand manager for a green product, for example an organic food item or an energy-efficient appliance, how would you go about marketing the product knowing these licensing effects were possible?

**Resources:**

Organic Market Analysis – Organic Trade Association

<https://www.ota.com/resources/market-analysis>

Research: Reusable Shopping Bags May Encourage an Unhealthier Diet

[http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/news\\_events/news-releases/bollinger-shopping-bags/](http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/news_events/news-releases/bollinger-shopping-bags/)

How going green may make you mean

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/mar/15/green-consumers-more-likely-steal>

Goodies behaving badly

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cif-green/2010/mar/16/green-consumers-lie-more-ethics>

Are green consumers more unethical?

[http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/thane\\_burnett/2010/03/16/13246791.html](http://www.torontosun.com/news/columnists/thane_burnett/2010/03/16/13246791.html)

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

<http://www.comm.ucsb.edu/faculty/rrice/Atkinson.pdf>

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