

Greenhushing: does it really pay to disclose sustainable cues on online delivery platforms?

Abstract

This project investigates the impact of revealing product sustainability cues in the post-purchase compared to the pre-purchase phase on online delivery platforms. Businesses often face the choice of explicitly communicating the sustainable nature of their products (e.g., local products, low food waste) or keeping a low profile and focusing on the quality or appeal of their products. The latter choice is known as "greenhushing," which refers to the intentional decision by companies to hide their green efforts to avoid further scrutiny and unwanted backlash (e.g., perceptions of less tasty products or higher costs) from consumers or third parties. In this work, we suggest that companies can still benefit from their green efforts while avoiding the potential risks associated with framing their products as green or sustainable. We propose that disclosing the sustainable nature of a product at the post-purchase stage enhances customer satisfaction and prompts positive reviews, thereby challenging the perception of sustainable products as expensive, which often negatively influences consumer choice during the pre-purchase phase. By avoiding interference with the consumer's decision-making process and not using any signals or cues (e.g., labels, claims) that point to the product's sustainability, the purchase decision is based solely on the product's inherent attributes. Disclosing the product's sustainable nature after purchase is likely to have positive consequences and may encourage repeat purchases.

Keywords: delivery platforms, sustainable cues, green products, greenhushing

Introduction

In today's marketplace, consumers are increasingly faced with choices between organic products and their more traditional counterparts. According to Statista (2024), in 2022, sales of organic food amounted to about 134.76 billion U.S. dollars, up from nearly 18 billion dollars in 2000. Extant literature has widely analyzed what motivates consumers to choose an organic or green product, such as the color of the packaging (Sokolova, Krishna, and Döring 2023), the presence of eco-labels (Neumayr and Moosauer 2021) or the green frames used to communicate the product (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014). Moreover, recent literature has also demonstrated the *green consumption effect* suggesting that using a green (vs. conventional) product enhances the enjoyment of the accompanying consumption experience (Tezer and Bodur, 2020).

However, despite the growing demand for sustainable options, challenges persist, particularly concerning consumers' perceptions of organic products' costliness and performance. It is acknowledged that some consumers may be reluctant to purchase organic products because they are usually perceived as more costly than traditional ones (Dale, 2008; Haws, Winterich, Naylor 2014; Mintel 2010). Moreover, research suggests that consumers attach lower performance to green products since they think that

companies have diverted resources to make the product greener (Mai et al. 2019; Newman, Gorlin and Dhar 2014; Usrey et al. 2020). Additionally, a recent literature review posits that sustainability claims may inadvertently trigger negative consequences on consumer behavior (Acuti, Pizzetti, and Dolnicar 2022). This conventional wisdom has been also confirmed by some interviews we have conducted with online food delivery platforms managers who declared: *“if I add an organic label to the product, consumers do not choose it because it is perceived as a more expensive product”* (Interview conducted with a local delivery platform manager in December 2023). These managers expressed reluctance to disclose sustainable attributes of products on delivery platforms due to the prevalent perception among consumers that such products are more expensive, potentially deterring purchases.

The present study aims to explore the impact of disclosing product sustainability cues post-purchase versus pre-purchase on online delivery platforms. Contrary to conventional wisdom, our research reveals that post-purchase disclosure not only enhances consumer satisfaction but also prompts positive reviews, challenging the prevailing notion that sustainable products are invariably expensive and less desirable. This finding underscores the significance of timing in communicating sustainability attributes, as delayed disclosure allows consumers to form unbiased perceptions without undue influence on their initial purchasing decisions.

Theoretical framework

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication literature has widely analyzed the importance of communicating CSR in order to increase brand loyalty, intention to purchase, legitimacy and reputation (e.g. Crane and Glozer, 2016). At the same time literature has emphasized the risks associated to CSR communication suggesting the presence of a Catch 22 of communication (Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, 2008), leading some companies to “greenhushing”, namely situations where companies employ CSR practices but deliberately withholds information about them (Ginder et al., 2021). Literature has mostly analyzed greenhushing from a company perspective suggesting that companies prefer not to disclose their CSR efforts as a strategy to minimize public exposure in order to shield themselves from contestation or to reduce communication costs, especially when considering small and medium companies (Wickert et al., 2016). For instance, Carlos and Lewis (2018) found that some companies adopt a strategic silence by hindering sustainability certifications when they perceived a threat to their legitimacy or reputation. Font et al. (2017) found that small rural tourism businesses in the Peak District National Park (UK) prioritized customer experience and landscape appeal over sustainability practices, communicating less than one third of their sustainability efforts to visitors. This approach aimed to prevent tourists from feeling guilty about visiting these unspoiled areas.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no research has investigated how consumers react to greenhushing and in particular how they react when they discover to have bought an organic product without knowing it before. How does it affect their expectations? Does it lead to a higher level of satisfaction? Does it lead to a higher

intention to leave a review or to spread word of mouth about the product they have chosen? Our study aims to answer to these questions by exploring consumer responses to greenhushing, specifically examining their reactions upon discovering post-purchase that a product is organic. By elucidating the impact of delayed disclosure on consumer expectations, satisfaction levels, and propensity to leave reviews, we offer novel insights into the dynamics of sustainable consumption behavior.

We hypothesize that revealing the green nature of a food product only after the purchase will have a positive effect translated by higher satisfaction and a higher intention to leave a review. This effect is explained by exceeding the expectations of the consumer caused by revealing the green nature of the product in the post-purchase stage. Instead of hiding the green characteristics of its products, companies can reveal these features only after consumers' decision to complete the purchase. We believe that this strategy will protect companies from negative spillovers of green claims (i.e., higher price perception and lower performance) and will not interfere in the consumer decision making process when making a purchase.

Methodology

In our study, we randomly assigned 100 US Prolific participants ($M_{age} = 38.45$, 49% females) to two experimental conditions. Participants were shown an assortment of four apples with different colors, types, and prices emulating a real online delivery platform that sells groceries (see Figure 1).

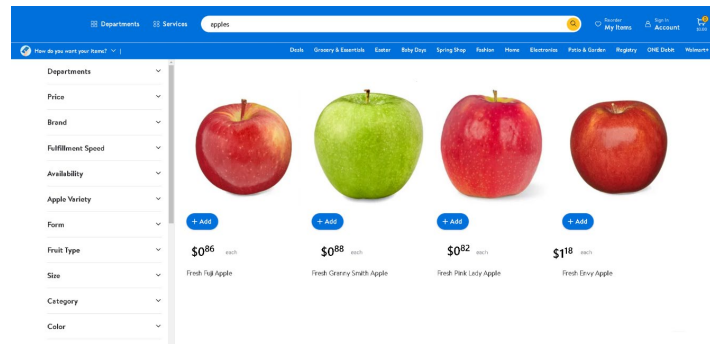


Figure 1: Assortment of apples on the delivery platform

We instructed respondents to choose the most preferred apple from the assortment (i.e., the apple that they would choose in a real purchase setting). After that, participants were either shown a standard thank you message by the platform for their choice – control condition – (i.e., Thank you for ordering from us! Your order is confirmed, and we're getting it ready to ship. We hope to see you again.) or a message that revealed the organic characteristic of the apple they have chosen – treatment condition (i.e., Thank you for ordering from us! Your order is confirmed, and we're getting it ready to ship. We're excited to let you know that the product you've chosen is an organic product. We

hope to see you again.). All participants in the treatment condition saw this message regardless of their choice. We will control in our analysis for the choice of apple. Subsequently, respondents rated the apple they have chosen in terms of expectations (please rate the apple you have chosen) on a 7-point scale (1 = much worse than expected, 7 = much better than expected) (Diehl and Poynor 2010), their satisfaction (my feelings toward the apple I have chosen can best be characterized as) on a 7-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = satisfied) (Taylor and Baker 1994), and their likelihood and motivation to leave a review (please indicate how likely / motivated you would be to post a star rating and a text review at the review forum?) on a two item ($\alpha = .94$) 7-point scale (1 = Not very likely / motivated, 7 = very likely / motivated) (Bond, He, and Wen 2019). Finally, participants reported their age and gender.

Preliminary Results

Findings show that participants reported higher expectations ($M_{control} = 4.8$, $SD = .990$; $M_{treatment} = 5.48$, $SD = .995$; $t(98) = 3.43$, $p < .001$) and satisfaction ($M_{control} = 5.64$, $SD = 1.16$; $M_{treatment} = 6.08$, $SD = .944$; $t(98) = 2.08$, $p = .020$) in the treatment condition compared to the control condition. Next, we tested for mediation: condition (0 = control, 1 = treatment) was a significant predictor of expectations ($b = .68$, $SE = .19$, $t(98) = 3.43$, $p < .001$), which, in turn, was a significant predictor of both satisfaction ($b = .60$, $SE = .09$, $t(98) = 6.66$, $p < .001$) and intention to write a review ($b = .52$, $SE = .18$, $t(98) = 2.99$, $p = .004$). Our estimation of the indirect effect using 10,000 bootstrap replications produced a significant indirect effect of our treatment on satisfaction ($a \times b = .41$, $SE = .13$, 95% CI .17 to .68) and intention to write a review ($a \times b = .36$, $SE = .17$, 95% CI .07 to .71) via expectations. Importantly, this indirect effect remained significant when we controlled for apple choice.

Conclusion

Although consumer demand for sustainable options is certainly on the rise, there is room to further encourage and support sustainable consumer behaviors, trying to overcome apprehensions regarding costliness and performance which continue to impede widespread sustainable adoption. Our study sheds light on the impact of post-purchase revelation of a product's organic nature, demonstrating that such disclosure significantly elevates consumers' expectations, satisfaction levels, and intention to leave a review. This finding suggests a promising strategy for companies to enhance consumer perceptions without influencing their initial purchasing decisions, thereby potentially mitigating negative associations often linked with green product cues.

Moreover, our research underscores the importance of timing in communicating sustainability attributes, suggesting that postponing disclosure until after the purchase decision mitigates negative associations often linked with green product cues. This approach not only safeguards companies from potential backlash associated with perceived high prices but also empowers consumers to make informed choices without undue bias.

The preliminary results of our study pave the way for future research avenue. First, we will introduce additional mediators and moderators in the experimental design in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the processing mechanism between the condition presented in the scenarios and the dependent variables. Second, we are planning to conduct some field experiments in a real online delivery platform setting in order to rely on actual behavioral data, offering maximum realism (Moorman et al., 2019; Morales et al., 2017). Third, we are planning to analyze the phenomena also in an offline environment to understand whether effects will persist also in the offline realm or not.

Selected References

- Acuti, D., Pizzetti, M., & Dolnicar, S. (2022). When sustainability backfires: A review on the unintended negative side-effects of product and service sustainability on consumer behavior. *Psychology & Marketing*, 39(10), 1933-1945.
- Carlos, W. C., & Lewis, B. W. (2018). Strategic silence: Withholding certification status as a hypocrisy avoidance tactic. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(1), 130-169.
- Crane, A., & Glozer, S. (2016). Researching corporate social responsibility communication: Themes, opportunities and challenges. *Journal of management studies*, 53(7), 1223-1252.
- Diehl, K., & Poynor, C. (2010). Great expectations?! Assortment size, expectations, and satisfaction. *Journal of marketing research*, 47(2), 312-322.
- Font, X., Elgammal, I., & Lamond, I. (2017). Greenhushing: The deliberate under communicating of sustainability practices by tourism businesses. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 25(7), 1007-1023.
- Haws, K. L., Winterich, K. P., & Naylor, R. W. (2014). Seeing the world through GREEN-tinted glasses: Green consumption values and responses to environmentally friendly products. *Journal of consumer psychology*, 24(3), 336-354.
- Mai, R., Hoffmann, S., Lasarov, W., & Buhs, A. (2019). Ethical products= less strong: How explicit and implicit reliance on the lay theory affects consumption behaviors. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 158, 659-677.
- Newman, G. E., Gorlin, M., & Dhar, R. (2014). When going green backfires: How firm intentions shape the evaluation of socially beneficial product enhancements. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 41(3), 823-839.
- Sokolova, T., Krishna, A., & Döring, T. (2023). Paper meets plastic: The perceived environmental friendliness of product packaging. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 50(3), 468-491.
- Olsen, M. C., Slotegraaf, R. J., & Chandukala, S. R. (2014). Green claims and message frames: How green new products change brand attitude. *Journal of Marketing*, 78(5), 119-137.
- Tezer, A., & Bodur, H. O. (2020). The greenconsumption effect: How using green products improves consumption experience. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 47(1), 25-39.
- Usrey, B., Palihawadana, D., Saridakis, C., & Theotokis, A. (2020). How downplaying product greenness affects performance evaluations: Examining the effects of implicit and explicit green signals in advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 49(2), 125-140.