

Green advertising: comparative analysis of Portuguese, French and Italian magazine ads

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Abstract

Since the 1980s, marketers have developed several strategies to target the environmental concerned consumer, including environmental appeals in advertising. Although criticism about the validity of this green marketing, most corporations still desire to link corporate identity to the increasingly popular values of environmental quality, as a strategy for image enhancement.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze current trends in advertising with explicit environmental appeals, as well as the influence of public agenda over current advertising strategies focusing on the environment. The paper also compares green ads published in three European countries: France, Italy and Portugal. Although sharing several cultural, institutional and geographical conditions, these countries reveal in international surveys to have different attitudes regarding the environment. The sample of 160 green ads was drawn from all the ads published from January to June 2008 in seven high circulation weekly magazines of the selected countries: *Visão* and *Sábado* (Portugal); *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Point* and *L'Express* (France); and *L'Espresso* and *Panorama* (Italy).

The results show significant differences in the frequency and structure of green advertisements in the compared countries. These differences seem to be associated with specific cultural contexts of the three countries. The findings also show an influence of public agenda on advertising appeals. In fact, among the most frequent appeals are those related to energy issues and climate change. In accordance with it, the majority of the analyzed green ads refer to products directly connected with energy and greenhouse gas emissions, such as automobiles, energy companies and appliances – precisely the business sectors that, facing the public concern about climate change, mostly need to appear in the public sphere with an environmental friendly image.

Introduction

In a 2008 survey, 96% of the European respondents said environmental protection is very important or fairly important for them (Eurobarometer, 2008). And in a survey carried out between August and September of 2009 in the 27 European Union member states, climate change was ranked as the second most serious problem faced by the world today, after “poverty, the lack of food and water” and prior to “a major global economic downturn” (Eurobarometer, 2009).

Since 2006, environmental issues such as those related to climate change and energy have been subject to considerable media and political attention at the international level and several kinds of political and civic initiatives have been developed, this way contributing to the scheduling of environmental issues in public agendas. With all the attention surrounding climate change, it is not surprising that recent Eurobarometer surveys show that the European’s willingness to change some personal consumption habits to curb greenhouse gas emissions is increasing. Eurobarometer surveys also show that the majority of Europeans

believe that protecting the environment and fighting climate change can have a positive impact on the economy (Eurobarometer, 2009). However, while the majority of Europeans say they are ready to buy environmentally friendly products even if they are more expensive, not so many have actually done so (Eurobarometer, 2008).

Public awareness of environmental problems has increased over the last three decades and most corporations have desired to link corporate goals and behaviour to the increasingly popular values of environmental quality (Cox, 2006). Companies have been exploring the individual's interest and concern for the environment as a business opportunity. Ecological and alternative products, recyclable packaging and social responsibility strategies have been developed and announced - in the labels, in the advertisements, and in the media in general. The "green marketing" emerged as the attempt of the companies to connect their products, services and identity to environmental values and images through the use of corporate public relations and marketing (Cox, 2006).

According to Banerjee, Gulas and Iyer (1995), green advertising may be defined as any ad that meets one or more of the following criteria: (1) explicitly or implicitly addresses the relationship between a product or service and the biophysical environment; (2) promotes a green lifestyle with or without highlighting a product or service; and (3) presents a corporate image of the environmental responsibility. With these ads, companies promote the idea that, by consuming allegedly environmental friendly products, consumers can contribute to protect the planet. In this sense, allegedly environmental performances of the product or services are highlighted, but marketers may also develop strategies for projecting an environmentally concerned corporate image, rather than focusing on their products or services.

As Anders Hansen (2002) noted, studies on advertising provided evidence for a "greening" of marketing to match the increase in media news coverage and public concern about environmental issues from late 1980s to mid-1990s: environmental appeals had then a considerable surge in advertising. After that green ads almost disappeared (Corbett, 2002; Hansen, 2002). In fact, many environmental groups and critics questioned the validity of this green marketing, considering it deceptive and calling it mere «greenwashing» - designed only to ensure that the corporation maintains a positive public image, regardless of its behavior. In this perspective, green marketing tends to be understood as a strategy of differentiation of companies, offering competitive advantages, more than a reflection of environmentally friendly business activities. The deception and errors of omission in many green ads poses a problem of credibility in this sort of advertising.

Meanwhile, advertising has found in the environmental protection and association to nature a number of culturally valued significations, which tend to be absent from the lives of the majority of the population, and constitute strong rhetoric arguments (Corbett, 2006; Cox, 2006). Nature imagery and appeals to the "natural" are currently prominently deployed (Hansen, 2002).

Julia Corbett (2006) distinguished four basic types of advertisements featuring the environment or containing green appeals. Firstly, ads with natural elements in the scenery (nature-as-backdrop). In these ads, non-human icons, like animals or landscapes, are deliberately displayed. It is not suggested the acquisition of any product directly and obviously related with the environment, instead there is an attempt to associate the product with nonmaterial qualities found in nature. Secondly, ads in which the products and/or services are presented with environmentally friendly attributes (green product). The consumer is incited that, by buying the advertised product, will be contributing to a "green" lifestyle. Thirdly, ads which present companies and/or organizations with an environmentally responsible corporate image (green image). These ads do not suggest the acquisition of specific products; the attention is drawn to the organization's actions being considered pro-environment. Finally, ads

advocating the defense of environment issues. It is not suggested the acquisition of specific products. It encourages to attitudes and behaviors seen as environmentally correct. They attempt to change public perception, promoting trust and acceptance of a certain position in relation with environmental issues.

Method

This research consists in a comparative analysis of the advertising with explicit environmental appeals published in three European countries. The purpose of the research was to identify current trends in green ads, as well as the influence of public agenda over current advertising strategies focusing on the environment. The selected countries are France, Italy and Portugal. Although sharing several cultural, institutional and geographical conditions, including the European Union's background and environmental policy, these three countries reveal in international surveys to have different attitudes regarding the environment.

The sample of 160 green ads was drawn from all the ads published during six months (from January to June 2008) in seven high circulation weekly magazines of the selected countries: *Visão* and *Sábado* (Portugal); *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Point* and *L'Express* (France); and *L'Espresso* and *Panorama* (Italy). All the ads containing explicit environmental appeals were classified as green ads and selected for analysis.

The selected ads were subject to quantitative content analysis and the variables considered included the identification of each ad, the country where it was published and the category of the product; the spatial organization and the composition of the ad; the values conveyed; and the alleged environmental benefits.

Results and discussion

From a total of 2.127 ads observed, 160 were classified as green ads. Although the analyzed Italian magazines contained higher levels of advertisements, Italy was the country where the proportion of green ads was lower: 2,1%, against 5,6% in Portuguese magazines and 4,5% in French magazines (see table 1).

An Eurobarometer survey carried out in that year also showed some differences between the respondents of these three countries: 79% of the French, 67% of the Portuguese and 64% of the Italians said that protecting the environment is very important to them personally. Furthermore, 77% of the French, 75% of the Portuguese and 72% of the Italians of the poll said they are ready to buy environmentally friendly products even if they are more expensive (Eurobarometer, 2008).

Results from another Eurobarometer survey seem to accentuate a trend for French respondents reveal higher levels of environmental concern than respondents from the two other countries. In fact, 71% of the French have considered global warming as the most serious problem the world faces nowadays, while only 47% of the Portuguese and of the Italians stated the same opinion (Eurobarometer, 2008b).

Although 3,5% of the observed ads referred to ecological or biological products, or contained environment favorable arguments, a large number of these green ads (75%) were positioned on a page on the right, and most of them (85%) filled a whole page. This means that, in this kind of advertising, companies are ready to invest in privileged advertising inserts.

Table 1. Analyzed ads, by country

Magazines		Selected Green Ads	Proportion of Green Ads
Portugal	Visão	43	3,5%
	Sábado	17	7,8%
	Total	60	Average = 5,6
France	Le N. Observ.	51	5,2%
	Le Point	3	4,3%
	L'Express	2	4,1%
	Total	56	Average = 4,5
Italy	L'Espresso	32	2%
	Panorama	12	2,2%
	Total	44	Average = 2,1
Total		160	3,5%

Regarding the categories of the products represented in the analyzed green ads, the high proportion (38,1%) of vehicles, energy companies and its products (23,8%) and electrical appliances (13,8%), all of them with high impacts on energy use and greenhouse gas emissions, seems to reveal the influence of the international context of energetic crisis and social perception of climate changes in this kind of advertising (see table 2).

Table 2. Categories of products of the analyzed ads (%)

Vehicles and accessories	38,1
Energy	23,8
Electronics, electrical appliances	13,8
Profit public services, leisure, tourism	8,1
Confection, complements and jewelry	5,6
Others	3,1
Non-profit public services	1,9
Non-alcoholic drinks	1,9
Cleaning products	1,3
Media, publications, office materials	1,3
Food	1,3

According with the aforementioned typology of Julia Corbett (2006), the most frequent kind of advertisement (76% of the cases) in the sample mentioned product qualities allegedly good for the environment. In half of the cases (51%) natural elements were used in the ad scenery. 29%

of these ads were meant to convey an environmentally responsible corporate image. A small portion of sample corresponded to advocacy ads (16%). As predicted by Julia Corbett (2006), many of the ads presented combinations of these four types.

The results show differences between the three countries. Most of the French (80,4%) and the Portuguese (80,0%) ads of the sample contained claims involving attributes of the product allegedly environmental friendly, as the Italian ads of the sample contained these claims in a smaller frequency (63,6%), this is, as often as featuring nature-as-backdrop (63,6%) (see table 3).

Table 3. Types of ads with green appeal, by country (%)

Type of green appeal	France	Portugal	Italy
Nature-as-backdrop	37,5	55,0	63,6
Green product attributes	80,4	80,0	63,6
Green image	17,9	43,3	22,7
Environmental advocacy	17,9	26,7	11,4

Regarding more specifically the appeals conveyed in the analyzed green ads, the most frequent claims (58,8 %) are generic arguments in favor of alleged green qualities of the product (see table 4). These are claims such as “environmentally friendly”, and often are not substantiated by the characteristics or performance of the product.

Claims associated with current environmental issues such as climate change and energy crisis ranked as second, third, fourth and sixth more frequent. These claims focused on the product’s attributes related to energy efficiency, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, the use of renewable energies and climate change. Other specific claims, such as the reduced impact of pollutants, recycling, reuse, organic farming or biodegradability, although their relevance for the environment had a smaller presence in the sample. This seems to evidence a change over time in the type of environmental appeals conveyed by green ads. In fact, an analysis of Portuguese green ads in 2004 reveals that by then claims associated with energy and climate change had no expression (Alexandre and Miranda, 2004). This observation together with the prominence of arguments related with the public agenda – energy and climate change – also suggests the influence of public agenda on the claims conveyed by green advertising.

Table 4. Appeals conveyed in the analyzed ads (%)

Friendly to nature/the environment/protects the planet	58,8
Energy efficiency	57,6
Emissions reduction	38,6
Linking to the natural elements	37,3
Renewable energy	29,1
Pollutants reduction	15,2
Climate change	12,0

Recycling	7,6
Sustainability	7,0
Preservation of natural resources	5,1
Reuse	3,8
Organic farming	3,8
Forestation and/or biodiversity	3,2
Biodegradability	0,6

To communicate effectively, advertising calls for values underlined by the culture of the intended audience. To capture the values portrayed in these green ads, Amir Hetsroni (2000) developed a combination of values and appeals in advertising. Accordingly, emotional appeals are closely related to altruistic and hedonistic values, whereas rational appeals are often conjunct with functional values. Functional values are associated with characteristics such as efficiency, quality and safety; hedonistic values are associated with joy/happiness, leisure, and adventure; and altruistic are associated with charity, patriotism and collectivism (Hetsroni, 2000).

The overall results showed that the green ads of the sample corresponded most of the cases (80,4%) to functional values. Yet, half of the ads (53,1%) also contained appeals associated to emotional values: 27,2% portrayed altruistic values and 25,9% conveyed hedonistic values. According with the results of Hetsroni (2000) analysis, ads generally convey as many rational appeals (51%) as emotional appeals (49%), and generally the frequency of hedonistic values is considerably greater than the frequency of altruism. These different proportions found in the green ads sample indicate a specificity of the appeals thought by marketers to more effectively target the environmental concerned consumer. As Alexandre and Miranda (2004) stated, in green advertising the utilitarian function of the products tends to prevail, as well as the appeal to common sense, to logic and to calculus, providing objective arguments. Therefore, green ads seem to appeal, in great measure, to consumers' rationality, by enhancing the functionality of the products.

The results by country show that nearly all the ads (98,2%) published in the selected French magazines contained characteristics associated with functional values; in Portuguese and Italian magazines, these characteristics represented 73,3% and 70,5%. Values associated with hedonism were more frequent in Portuguese ads (31,7%) than in French (26,8%) and Italian ads (15,9%). In Italian ads altruistic values ranked as the second most frequent (31,8%), while in the other two countries it ranked as third (see table 5).

Table 5. Values conveyed in green ads, by country (%)

Values	France	Portugal	Italy
Functional	98,2	73,3	70,5
Hedonistic	26,8	31,7	15,9
Altruistic	23,2	23,2	31,8

Again, the context of energetic crisis and the public concern with the emissions of greenhouse gases with effects on climate change may have contributed to the appreciation of efficiency and rationality of the advertised products.

Conclusions

The results seem to show significant differences in the frequency and structure of green advertisements in the compared countries. These differences seem to be associated with specific cultural contexts of the three countries, although further analysis and research should validate this hypothesis.

The findings also seem to show the influence of the public agenda and current environmental issues on green advertising appeals. In fact, among the most frequent appeals in the ad sample are those related to energy issues and climate change. In accordance with it, the majority of the analyzed green ads refer to products directly connected with energy and greenhouse gas emissions, such as automobiles, energy companies and appliances – precisely the business sectors that, facing the public concern about climate change, mostly need to appear in the public sphere with an environmental friendly image.

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