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How Cultural Capital Shapes Green Product Preferences Among Materialists

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How Cultural Capital Shapes Green Product Preferences Among Materialists

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In 2010, Burroughs raised the provocative question whether green products might have taken over from “classic prestige goods” (extravagant, expensive, large) as the new status goods. Besides purely selfless motives that foster this growing market, the idea of competitive altruism can serve to explain the notion of green status consumption (Griskevicius, Tybur, & van den Bergh 2010). Following this idea and considering that status consumption and materialism are highly correlated (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn 1999; Goldsmith & Clark 2007) one could argue that green might be ‘the new black’ in a materialistic world. However, this assumption challenges much of the existing literature on materialism that shows large agreement with regard to the incompatibility of materialistic and environmentally-friendly consumer behavior (Banerjee & McKeage 1994; Brown & Kasser 2001; Kasser 2002; Kilbourne & Pickett 2008; Muncy & Eastman 1998).

We offer an alternative account that allows co-existence of materialistic values and green consumption. In our theorizing we draw on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. Traditionally, materialists are seen as people who like to signal their economic capital and possess only limited cultural capital (Holt 1998). Recent theorizing about the nature of materialism (Shrum et al. 2013), however, suggests that even materialists might consider signaling of cultural capital as an important means to achieve their status goals. Two studies, one qualitative and one experimental study address the relevance of green consumption choices as ways of signaling cultural capital for achieving materialistic goals. We propose and demonstrate that materialists appreciate the associations of desirable rare personality traits that can be attributed to buyers of green products. This can lead them to favoring green products even when these products are not more costly than non-green alternatives.

We conducted four semi-structured phenomenological interviews. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were conducted with two customers, the manager as well as one salesman of a farm shop in a well-situated neighborhood. We were particularly interested in different perspectives, customer self-perception as well as observations by the staff. We were especially interested in where we assumed materialistic tendencies and found several indications both in responses from farm shop employees as well as responses from the customers. The conspicuous display of wealth by owning status-relevant goods or enjoying activities such as playing golf or by sending their servants shows parallels to Veblen (1899) and is a strong indicator for materialistic behavior. Our interviews also confirm green conspicuous consumption practices for example by owning pro-environmental products that are both scarce and/or more expensive than alternative products. Additionally, even the acquisition of rather inconspicuous goods such as food can be transferred into an act of conspicuous consumption by using branded canvas bags as signs of their “good” shopping habits.

More importantly, products consumed at the farm shop might be appropriate for gaining social stratification by the demonstration of cultural capital. They are “ideationally difficult and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so” (Holt 1998, p. 4). Especially buying and consuming food is an area that allows for the development of connoisseurship (Potter 2010). Having unique knowledge (e.g., about the origins of products such as meat, cheese or specific production techniques) enables a person

to differentiate. This view offers an interesting extension to the ongoing materialism discussion that focuses on economic capital and, hence, economic scarcity. By contrast, the notion of subtle signals such as cultivated knowledge that is invisible to outside groups but at the same time signals belonging to a certain group (Berger & Ward 2010; McCracken 1999) points to an additional avenue for materialists to gain social status. However, usage of cultural capital is not limited to other-signaling processes but can also be part of unconscious processes that serve self-verification purposes (Elliot 2013; see also Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus). Combined, they make for a compelling case regarding the desirable features of signaling cultural capital.

In the empirical study (n=171), we employed a two-factorial (green personality traits: scarce, abundant) between-subject design. We measured materialism using Richins’ (2004) 9-item Material Value Short Scale. Participants viewed two different ads and were asked to evaluate them. Depending on the experimental condition, participants either saw ads indicating that only 21% (67%) of the population are willing to help others without expecting anything in return. Participants then were asked to make a hypothetical product choice for coffee set, each presented with two alternatives (green, non-green). Results of the experimental study support our contention that materialists prefer green products when consumption of these products entails scarce personality features of the consumer. While rare personality traits increase the desirability of the green coffee option for materialists, individuals with a medium or low materialistic disposition did not show any differences in product preference. Conversely, the information that personality traits are widely distributed increased the desirability of the non-green coffee option among materialists.

Concluding, results of both studies have several interesting implications. We demonstrate the relevance of green consumption choices as ways of signaling cultural capital for achieving materialistic goals and show that materialists appreciate the associations of desirable rare personality traits that can be attributed to buyers of green products. Future research should explore how much this green identity can be stretched with materialistic behavior without having a detrimental effect on the green identity and hence, on perceptions of cultural capital in that domain. An interesting avenue in this respect would be that cultural capital is socially constructed. Therefore, one could argue that a materialist that is surrounded by like-minded peers with similar (materialistic) consumption habits might not feel uneasy about this inconsistent behavior. Rather it is likely, that feelings of being morally superior to other people (i.e. who do not care about environment at all) helps to secure the own cultural capital. Following this idea, another interesting question that arises regards possible demythologization strategies materialists would apply when genuinely green consumers threaten their “green” identity.

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