

When Not Belonging Means Bad News for the Planet: How a Low Sense of Belonging Diminishes the Value of Sustainable Products

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ABSTRACT

Consumers increasingly report feeling disconnected from others. They live farther from family, belong to fewer social groups and are more likely to live alone than ever before (Pew Research Center 2015). A low sense of belonging is an aversive state for consumers, since relationships provide access to survival benefits such as resources and protection (Buss 1990). Consumers often use sustainable products to help them experience belonging since these products are typically more expensive than non-sustainable products and can signal that one is a good, cooperative group member who is willing to incur individual costs to maintain a group resource (e.g., the environment) (Griskevicius et al. 2010). However, we suggest that sustainable products lose their value when individuals feel like they do not belong, as these individuals cannot extract social benefits from the group such as elevated group status and increased access to resources within groups. Four experiments test this assertion while providing process evidence and boundary conditions for the proposed effect. Experiment 1 demonstrates that individuals lower in their sense of belonging evaluate sustainable products less favorably than those higher in their sense of belonging. Experiment 2 provides process evidence to show that this effect occurs as a low sense of belonging triggers a focus away from others and leads to less concern for social acceptance when making sustainable purchases. Experiments 3 and 4 find that the negative impact of low belonging on sustainable products is eliminated when the social aspect of the product is removed. These results suggest that marketers must account for consumers' willingness to incur the costs of participating in sustainable behaviors, especially among consumers low in belonging.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ainslie E. Schultz received her Ph.D. from the University of Arizona. She is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Arthur F. and Patricia Ryan Center for Business Studies at Providence College. Ainslie's research focuses on ways to improve consumer decision-making.

The goal of her research is to investigate questions that have implications for consumers' well-being and to use that knowledge to advise organizations about responding to consumer needs, reengaging consumers with existing products and services, or nudging consumers toward better decisions. Ainslie has published her research in the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Consumer Research*, and *Business Horizons*. Prior to starting her career in academia, she worked as an analyst for IMS Research.

Kevin P. Newman received his Ph.D. from the University of Arizona. He is an Assistant Professor of Marketing in the Arthur F. and Patricia Ryan Center for Business Studies at Providence College. Kevin uses experimental research techniques to better understand consumer behavior issues relating to corporate social responsibility, ethical branding, moral identity and behavior, self-control, and how consumers cultivate their identities through brands. He has published articles in these research areas at the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, *Marketing Letters*, and *Psychology & Marketing*.

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