Cues in a Coffee Shop: An Analysis on Ethical Consumerism

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Abstract

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This research experiment explores consumer behavior in regard to ethical purchases. Specifically, it investigates if consumer behavior is driven psychologically and subconsciously by the environment the consumer is in. This experiment seeks to prove that certain cues influence consumers to purchase ethically. This research consists of survey distributed to young adults in the Austin area. The four surveys were sent out at random, and each contains a variable in the visual of a coffee shop. The results indicate that certain cues, such as trash or trash bins, influence consumers to shop more sustainably within a coffee shop. This demonstrates that when negative effects of consumption are present, consumers are forced to think about their purchases and their personal impact on the issue. Other cues, such as the presence of a recycling bin, or the control, with nothing present, allow consumers to continue purchasing the way they would prefer, without considering "greenness".

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Research Question

Does the presence of trash or other items in a business affect a consumer's likeliness to purchase more ethically? When seeing these items, will the consumer be more willing to purchase a reusable mug?

Hypothesis

The presence of trash, either visible on the floor or in a trash-can, influences consumer behavior in that it leads consumers to make environmentally sustainable purchases, like a reusable mug. The items present in the coffee shop subconsciously affect the motivation of an individual to purchase an item that is sustainable for the environment, which in this case is a reusable mug.

Theory and Existing Literature

There is some existing literature in this field of study. With many "green" movements and trends towards ethical consumerism, research has been conducted to analyze the habits, behavior, and explanations for the habits and behavior when it comes to purchasing ethically. In the Reczek et. al paper on the memory of a consumer when it comes to remembering a product's attributes, the conclusion reached was that a consumer was more likely to remember if a product was ethical if they actually enjoyed the product. It finds that consumers are "willfully ignorant" and would rather purchase what they want

rather than experience the negative emotions associated with an ethical, or sustainable, decision. In this research paper, I seek to see if this "willfully ignorant" posture of consumers towards purchasing ethically or "greenly" persists with the different surveys. In other words, this research explores if trash present stirs these negative emotions in a consumer and motivates them to act, or if the lack of trash allows for the consumer to be "willfully ignorant" to the reusable cup offer.

In addition to this specific research on consumer behavior, there are many studies that analyze the correlation between "greenness" and certain demographics, for example, Kidwell, Farmer and Hardesty's work on how political ideologies impact and encourage sustainable practices on both sides of the spectrum. In other study, "greenness" is analyzed as it corresponds to gender, arguing that women tend to be greener. Though this study does not account for the political leanings of those surveyed, it does take into account certain demographic measures. With a small pool for data collection, this survey was largely taken by young adults, specifically women, within the Austin area of Texas. This literature could potentially explain results obtained in this experiment.

So, what does encourage a consumer to purchase responsibly? Giesler and Veresiu present one side of this discussion, that "responsible consumption conventionally stems from an increased awareness of the impact of consumption decisions on the environment, on consumer health, and on society in general", while also opposing this stance with processes that could also motivate responsible consumption. The research in this thesis serves to prove the first statement that Giesler and Veresiu presented: that responsible consumption comes from awareness of the consumption decision on the environment. This research serves to do this by presenting trash in a scene to show an effect of

consumption. Ideally, this cue would force a consumer to think about how their consumption habits actually impact the environment and force them to consume their drink in a sustainable reusable cup.

Lastly, a notable study is Newman, Gorlin, and Dhar's work "When Going Green Backfires", which presents the counterintuitive phenomenon that when a consumer sees a manufacturer or company as intentionally making their products "greener" they actually resist the product as opposed to greenness being a byproduct of something a company is doing well. Applying this analysis to the research in this thesis, a company promoting a reusable cup may actually be counterproductive to encouraging sustainability. However, the subtle cues of the presence of trash may seem unintentional but actually impact the consumer in their consumption behavior. This literature shapes the context for this thesis and the research conducted. It allows for further development of the psychological reasoning for the results found through these surveys.

Research Design

I. Variables: To test the hypothesis, four separate surveys were sent out at random to young adults, mainly in the Austin area. About 80 individuals took one of the four surveys. These individuals were sent the survey through the app GroupMe to students in the College of Liberal Arts and Moody College of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. Each of the four surveys followed the same structure and questions. The variable for the surveys was the image at the beginning of the survey. Each survey had an image of a coffee shop featuring a

variable, a trash can, a recycle bin, trash on the floor, in addition to a control with no variable present. These four conditions were labeled and will be referenced by these labels throughout this paper. The conditions were labeled A, B, C, and D. The control (coffee shop with no changes) was labeled A, the coffee shop with a trash can president was labeled B, the coffee shop with a recycle bin present was labeled C, and the coffee shop with an empty coffee cup pictured on the ground was labeled D.

i. Condition A Image (control)

ii. Condition B Image (trash can)

iii. Condition C Image (recycle bin)

iv. Condition D Image (cup trash on floor)

II. Questions on Survey

i. You're at your local coffee shop deciding what to order. Please take a minute to look over the coffee shop. Please rank the coffee shop décor in order that you like best. (lighting, oranges in case, flooring, wallpaper)

1. This question was asked with the intention of encouraging the individual taking the survey to closely examine the photo. Ideally, those taking surveys B, C, or D would subconsciously notice the variables and that the presence of the variables would shape his or her answers to the rest of the questions in the survey.

ii. Which are you most likely to order? (a latte, an iced drink, a decaf coffee, a chai tea latte)

1. This question was asked as a distractor question, simply attempting to shape the individual's mind around the ways he or she operates in a coffee shop.

iii. *You can either buy a normal drink for $4.25 or buy a reusable mug for $17.50 with your first drink free. What do you decide to buy? (Scale: 1=definitely do not buy reusable, 7=definitely buy reusable)*

    1. This question was written to allow individuals to indicate if they prefer reusable cups that they might get a deal, or if convenience of a single-use cup is preferred to the deal.

iv. *Assume you sometimes enjoy iced drinks. If the coffee shop did not offer straws would that influence whether you bought an iced drink or not? (Scale: 1=definitely yes, 7=definitely no)*

    1. This question was asked to determine if individuals consider "greenness" in particular regards to straw usage. Straw usage is something that is trendy to abstain from, and this answer could correlate to how likely someone is to "think green" in other scenarios.

v. *What is the **most** you would be willing to spend on a reusable mug from this coffee shop? (Free response)*

    1. This option was free response, but the results could've been shaped by the framing of question 3 and the $17.50 amount. This question can indicate where an individual draws the line in regard to cost vs. greenness.

vi. *In the coffee shop, was there a trash can present? (Yes, maybe, no)*

    1. This and the following three questions were used to assess if the individual consciously noticed anything in the initial image that

may have swayed them. Though these questions do not truly indicate that someone was swayed, rather if they knew they were being swayed.

vii. *In the coffee shop was there a recycle bin present? (Yes, maybe, no)*

viii. *Was the coffee shop empty? (Yes, maybe, no)*

ix. *Did you see a coffee cup on the ground? (Yes, maybe, no)*

x. *How often do you order from a coffee shop? (Scale: 0=never, 2=daily, 4= multiple times per day)*

1. This question was also asked to gauge interest and involvement with the subject matter.

xi. *BEGINNING OF DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS (All free response, except "green")*

xii. *Where do you live?*

xiii. *What is your gender?*

xiv. *What is your age?*

xv. *How much do you care about the environment? (How "green" are you?) (Scale: 1=not very, 7=very)*

xvi. *Any comments you would like to make about the survey?*

III. Contrast Codes and Regressions

i. To analyze the data received, contrast codes were created to give each condition a value. Contrast codes allow two or more conditions to be compared by using a set of data, for example, the results of the question "how much are you willing to pay for a reusable mug". The answers to

this question, depending on which survey the individual took would each be assigned a code that correlated with the respective survey (A, B, C or D). In addition, a regression was calculated comparing these codes with the results. This regression indicates if the data was due to random chance, or if the data is most likely indicative of something – not a coincidence. If the regression resulted with an F significance of less than .05, it was considered significant data, likely not due to random chance.

Results and Analysis

IV. Contrast Codes

i. For each of the analyses conducted for the different conditions, contrast codes are assigned. There are three contrast codes including: “control vs. all”, “recycle vs. all”, and “trash bin vs. cup”. In Table 1, the contrast codes with their assigned values are listed. The conditions are labeled A, B, C, and D. The control (coffee shop with no changes) is labeled A, the coffee shop with a trash can president is labeled B, the coffee shop with a recycle bin present is labeled C, and the coffee shop with a empty coffee cup pictured on the ground is labeled D.

Table 1

	Control (A)	Trash (B)	Recycle (C)	Cup(D)

Control vs	3	-1	-1	-1
Recycle vs	0	-1	2	-1
Trash vs cup	0	-1	0	1

ii. In the following results, significance was measured by significance F (as a result of regression of survey answers for conditions with contrast codes).

V. Willingness to Pay

i. "Control vs. All" code applied to Willingness to Pay for a reusable cup

1. Answers came in form of free response. (It is important to note that this question came after the question with the scale of $4.25-$17.50 with a free drink present. This is important because it may have created a frame for the price of a reusable mug)
2. Significance F = 0.0277 (significant)
3. Means for Conditions:

Condition	$ WTP
A	10.86
B	14.13
C	10.86
D	13.79

4. Analysis: People are willing to pay more for a reusable mug when a trash bin is present or when trash is on the floor, and less when there is a recycle bin present or nothing present. In other words, as

the means show, people were more willing to pay for two of the experimental conditions that are noted as “less sustainable” than the control and the sustainable condition (recycle bin).

ii. “Recycle vs. All” applied to Willingness to Pay for a reusable cup
    1. Significance F= 0.008 (significant)

iii. “Trash vs. Cup” applied to Willingness to Pay for a reusable cup
    1. Significance F= 0.884 (not significant)
    2. Analysis:

iv. Conclusion: Taken together, these results show that if you give people a cue (as opposed to nothing, as in the control condition), they will pay more for a reusable cup. Also, the presence of the recycle bin makes people willing to pay less than does the presence of the trash can or a cup on the ground.

VI. Reusable Cup vs. Disposable Cup

i. “Control vs. All” code applied to scale for purchasing a reusable cup
    1. Answers came from scale of 1-7, 1 being “definitely do not buy reusable”, 7 being “definitely buy reusable”
    2. Significance F = 0.0703
    3. Means for Conditions:

Condition	Reuse
A	2.59
B	3.3

C	2.91
D	3.59

4. Analysis: People are more likely to buy the disposable, cheaper cup than a reusable mug, except for in condition D, when the cheaper, disposable cup is seen on the ground. In Condition D, people are slightly more likely to purchase the reusable mug.

ii. "Recycle vs. All" applied to scale for purchasing a reusable cup

1. Significance F = 0.181 (not significant)

iii. "Trash vs. Cup" applied to scale for purchasing reusable cup

1. Significance F = 0.544 (not significant)

VII. Straw

i. "Control vs. All" applied to scale for likeliness for purchase of iced drink when straw not available

1. Answers came from a scale of 1-7, 1 being definitely yes (straws not available change individuals mind towards purchasing an iced drink) and 7 being definitely no (it does not change their mind).
2. Significance F = 0.630 (not significant)
3. Means for Conditions:

Condition	Straw
A	5.48
B	5.86
C	4
D	5.38

4. Analysis: People are not likely to change their mind about whether or not they will purchase an iced drink if straws are not provided at the coffee shop.

ii. "Recycle vs. All" applied to scale for purchase of iced drink when straw not available

1. Significance F = 0.007 (significant)

iii. "Trash vs. Cup" applied to scale for purchase of iced drink when straw not available

1. Significance F = 0.443 (not significant)

VIII. Demographics

i. Mean frequency of coffee shop visits per condition

Condition	**Mean Frequency**
A	1.24
B	1.33
C	1.14
D	1.19

1. This was conducted on a scale of 0 (meaning never), 2 (meaning daily), 4 (meaning multiple times per day). These results indicate that for all the conditions, individuals visited coffee shops at some point, but not a daily basis.
2. There could be error here, because people could have visited once a year and answer 1 or go once a week and answer 1. However, the mean is more than never, which means that the consumers are

familiar with and might frequent an environment similar to what was pictured.

ii. Mean age of survey takers per condition

Condition	Mean Age
A	20.85
B	19.54
C	21.5
D	18.69

1. This was a free response question and indicates that the individuals taking the survey are on average young adults, potentially in college.

iii. Mean "greenness" of individuals per condition

Condition	Mean "Greenness"
A	4.58
B	5.05
C	4
D	4.96

1. This scale ranged from 1 (not very) and 7 (very). This indicates that on average, the individuals taking the survey considered themselves greener than the average person, in all of the conditions. This is also beneficial because it indicates that the groups surveyed consider themselves around the same level of "greenness" yet have different results in the different conditions.

iv. Gender

Gender	%
Female (68)	83.95%
Male (12)	14.81%
Non-Binary (1)	1.23%

1. This indicates that the majority of those surveyed were female. Potential error in lack of diversity of genders.

v. Locations

Locations	%
Austin Area (62)	76.54%
Texas (17)	20.99%
Outside of Texas (2)	2.47%

1. This indicates that the majority of the individuals surveyed were located in the Austin area, if not in Texas
2. Potential bias because of environment of Texas.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research experiment indicate that a visual environment with certain cues can affect the ethicality of an individual's consumption patterns. When individuals are influenced by these items subconsciously, they are either more likely to act more ethical or neutral. Specifically, the presence of trash (bin or on the floor), influences individuals to consider a reusable mug for a higher price. However, when a recycle bin is present, it yields the same results as the control, with nothing influencing the consumer to spend more. These results also indicate that seeing the

negative results of purchasing habits may be beneficial in determining if someone will purchase an item ethically. But, when nothing is present or simply a recycle bin is present, neither cause the consumer to think differently about their purchase. Some demographic aspects may have influenced the results, since most were young adult females within Austin. However, this is still largely indicative of the psychological impacts the cues of trash were in shaping the purchasing habits of consumers. This subtle change in the environment of a store urged consumers to think about the effects of their purchase. This data is useful in understanding the behavior of consumers and their ethical responsibility to things such as the environment. Overall, the hypothesis was correct, and the results align closely with that of existing literature.

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