WHAT MAKES IT GREEN?
THE ROLE OF CENTRALITY OF GREEN ATTRIBUTES IN GREEN PRODUCT EVALUATION

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Concern about limited natural resources influences the decisions of both firms and consumers. Firms are including more recycled material in their products, building environmentally friendly supply chains, and developing manufacturing methods that avoid polluting their surrounding environments.

Consumers’ reactions to firms’ investments have been mixed. While some consumers espouse enthusiasm for more environmentally-friendly offerings, a recent Gallup poll suggests that many stop short of actually purchasing such products (Dunlap 2010). Customers have been found to suffer from “green fatigue” (Platt and Retallack 2009) and to be suspicious of “green washing” (www.greenwashingindex.com). A national poll of consumers found that just 12% of consumers trust product labels when they claim energy saving or environmentally friendly benefits (University of Texas Energy Poll 2013). While a sizeable literature has begun to explore how people evaluate green products, and when they are likely to choose them, a fundamental question remains unanswered: What makes a consumer perceive a product as green or not green to start with?

In this research, we look at factors that influence consumers’ perception of the environmental friendliness or greenness of a product. We explore this from the perspective of centrality theory (Sloman, Love, and Ahn 1998) which describes how features of objects vary in the extent to which they are essential or integral to defining and categorizing those objects. Extending this literature, we argue that making a product green depends on which or aspect of the product is linked to the green benefit. Holding all else constant, we hypothesize that when a green benefit is linked to a more central feature of a product, then the entire product will be perceived as more green than when it is linked to a less central feature.

We present four studies that support our hypotheses and associated boundary conditions. In all studies we hold constant the amount of benefit to the environment, and the percent of green material in the product, manipulating only the centrality of the feature to which the green benefit is associated. Consistent with expectations, we show that green benefits from more central features lead to more green evaluations of the entire product, and that the effects are moderated by extent of design integration of features, visual cohesiveness of presentation, and construal level at the point of product evaluation.