

Ethical Fatigue

Introduction

In recent years, the marketing landscape has seen a paradigm shift towards ethical branding, with companies increasingly promoting their commitment to social and environmental responsibilities. This trend aligns with a growing consumer demand for brands that not only offer quality products but also reflect personal values related to sustainability and ethical conduct. However, as ethical branding becomes more prevalent, a critical question arises: Does the constant bombardment of ethical marketing messages lead to "Ethical Fatigue" among consumers? This manuscript proposes the exploration of Ethical Fatigue, defined as the skepticism or indifference towards ethical branding caused by overexposure to marketing messages about ethics. This research aims to bridge a gap in the literature by focusing on the potential adverse effects of excessive ethical marketing on consumer perception and behavior.

Literature Review

The concept of ethical consumption is well-documented, with studies emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations in consumer purchase decisions (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011). Consumers increasingly seek out brands that demonstrate social and environmental responsibility, indicating a shift towards

more conscientious consumption patterns (Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2014). However, research on the implications of overexposure to ethical branding is sparse, signaling an opportunity to explore the phenomenon of Ethical Fatigue.

Consumer skepticism towards brand motives in ethical marketing has been noted, with studies indicating that consumers often question the authenticity of brands' ethical stances, suggesting a potential precursor to Ethical Fatigue (Parguel, Benoît-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011). Additionally, the concept of advertising wear-out suggests that repeated exposure to a specific message can lead to diminished consumer attention and engagement, which could extend to ethical marketing messages (Ehrenberg, Barnard, Kennedy, & Bloom, 2002).

Furthermore, the psychological impact of information overload in the digital age (Eppler & Mengis, 2004) may contribute to Ethical Fatigue, as consumers navigate an ever-increasing barrage of marketing communications, including ethical branding messages. This parallels findings in cognitive psychology that suggest excessive information can lead to decision fatigue, potentially influencing consumer reactions to ethical branding (Vohs et al., 2008).

Research Gap

Despite the substantial body of literature on ethical consumerism and skepticism towards marketing communications, the specific concept of Ethical Fatigue—stemming from overexposure to ethical branding—remains underexplored. This manuscript proposes to fill this gap by investigating how repeated exposure to ethical marketing messages influences consumer perceptions, potentially leading to skepticism or indifference. This research will contribute to the broader discourse on ethical consumer behavior, marketing ethics, and consumer psychology by introducing and elucidating the concept of Ethical Fatigue.

Study 1: Ethical Advertising Frequency's Impact on Brand Perception

In our investigation of ethical advertising frequency's impact on consumer perception of a brand's ethical stance, we manipulated exposure to ethical versus non-ethical brand statements before evaluating the target brand. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions: a control group with no ethical statements, a low-frequency group with two ethical and two non-ethical statements, and a high-frequency group with four ethical statements. Our hypothesis posited that while exposure to the target brand's ethical positioning would generally enhance perceptions of its ethicality, this effect would

attenuate as the frequency of ethical statements encountered increased.

We chose Nike as a target brand since it would be generally familiar to participants. We assessed perceptions of Nike's ethical position using an index of four measures:

- Nike is ethical.
- Nike cares about the environment.
- Nike is socially responsible.
- I would trust Nike to do what is right.

These measures were each assessed using a five-point Likert scale anchored at Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree. This assessment occurred twice, once before and once after the brand positioning statements were presented. The other brand positioning statements were taken from one of two lists. The ethical statements were:

- TOMS is committed to giving away a pair of shoes for every pair purchased. We believe in making a positive impact on the lives of others.
- Warby Parker provides affordable eyeglasses to people in need. We believe in making quality eyewear accessible to everyone.

- Method is committed to using plant-based ingredients and sustainable packaging. We believe in making a positive impact on the environment.
- Seventh Generation is committed to using non-toxic ingredients and environmentally friendly practices. We believe in making a healthier home for everyone.

The non-ethical statements were:

- Tesla is the future of transportation. With its sleek design, powerful acceleration, and long range, Tesla cars are the perfect way to experience the thrill of driving.
- The Apple Watch is the perfect companion for your iPhone. With its stylish design, comprehensive health tracking features, and convenient notifications, the Apple Watch makes it easy to stay connected and informed, all while keeping you on top of your fitness goals.
- The Sony PlayStation 5 is the ultimate gaming experience. With its incredible graphics, powerful processor, and immersive gameplay, the PlayStation 5 takes gaming to the next level.
- LEGO is more than just a toy. It is a creative tool that allows children and adults alike to express their imaginations and build whatever they can dream of. With its endless

possibilities and enduring appeal, LEGO is a timeless classic that continues to inspire generations.

In the low-frequency condition, two statements were randomly selected from each list. All other brand statements were presented one at a time in random order.^[1] After they had been presented, we presented the following target brand positioning statement: Nike is committed to using sustainable materials and practices. We are also committed to promoting social responsibility and empowering athletes of all levels. We then reassessed participants' perception of Nike's ethical stance and additional process and demographic questions.

Analyzing responses from 399 Prolific participants, we conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA to compare scores on perceptions of the brand's ethical stance before and after exposure to the manipulation. We observed high agreement among our index measures (Cronbach's alpha = .933 and .95 in the pre- and post-manipulation measures, respectively.) We observed a marginally significant interaction between the time (before vs. after manipulation) and condition, $F(2, 396) = 2.903$, $p = .056$, $\eta^2 = .01$. Post-hoc analyses revealed a significant increase in ethicality perceptions from before to after manipulation in all conditions ($M_{\text{diffs}} = 0.429, 0.405, 0.280$ in the control, low-

and high-frequency conditions, respectively, all p s $< .001$, see Figure 1). However, the magnitude of the increase was significantly greater in the control condition than in the high-frequency condition ($F(263) = 2.17$, $p = .031$) and marginally greater in the low-frequency than in the high-frequency condition ($F(263) = 1.83$, $p = .069$), supporting our hypothesis.

Figure 1: Mean change in ethical perception as a function of frequency of other brand ethical statements.

Error bars represent 1 standard error of the mean.

Study 2: Frequency and Framing's Moderating Effects on Ethical Positioning Response

Study 2 extended our examination to the moderating effects of message framing (promotion vs. prevention) on responses to ethical positioning, considering both the framing and frequency of ethical statements. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups in a 2 (ethical statement frequency: control vs. high) \times 2 (framing: promotion vs. prevention) factorial design. Our analysis focused on the interaction effects on brand perception following exposure. The other-brand positioning statements were framed as being either promotion-focused or prevention-focused and concerning ethical position or not. The

content of the messages was held constant across framing manipulations. Examples include:

- Non-ethical promotion: Elevate your driving experience with Tesla, the pinnacle of automotive innovation. With its cutting-edge technology, Tesla offers unrivaled acceleration, superior range, and a design that turns heads. Embrace the thrill of the future today and join the revolution in transportation, making every journey an exhilarating adventure.
- Non-ethical prevention: Guard against outdated driving experiences with Tesla. Don't let traditional vehicles hold you back with their limited capabilities. Tesla's advanced features, including powerful acceleration and extended range, ensure you're always ahead, preventing the discomfort of frequent stops and the frustration of slow, unresponsive drives.
- Ethical promotion: Step into a brighter future with TOMS! For every pair of shoes you purchase, another pair is gifted to someone in need, spreading joy and making positive strides towards global well-being. Embrace the power of your purchase to transform lives and walk in solidarity with communities worldwide.

- Ethical prevention: Avoid contributing to global disparity with TOMS. Every pair of shoes you purchase prevents a child from going barefoot, tackling the issue of poverty and disease spread through unprotected feet. Join us in the fight against inequality and ensure no individual is left vulnerable due to lack of footwear.

The full set of other-brand positioning statements can be found in the web appendix. The target brand (Nike) ethical positioning statement, procedure and dependent variable index items were unchanged from Study 1.

434 undergraduate students at a large US university participated in return for extra credit in introductory classes. Again, the agreement between ethical perception measures was high (.933 and .949 for the pre- and post-manipulation measures). A 2×2 ANOVA revealed no interaction between the frequency of ethical statements and the framing on perceived ethicality of the brand, $F(1, 430) = 1.063$, $p = .303$, $\eta^2 = .0025$.

Figure 2: Mean change in ethical perception as a function of frequency of other brand ethical statements and message framing.

Error bars represent 1 standard error of the mean.

Specifically, the presentation of Nike's ethical positioning statement increased perceptions of Nike's ethics overall ($M_{diff} = 0.298$, $t(434) = 10.32$, $p < .001$) but did not differ as a function of frequency ($t(434) = 1.525$, $p = .128$), framing ($t(434) = 0.970$, $p = .332$), or their interaction. The change in ethical perception was greatest in the control/prevention condition ($M = .392$) but this did not differ significantly from the other three conditions as seen in Figure 2.

Discussion

Our findings from Study 1 and Study 2 contribute to the understanding of ethical fatigue in consumer psychology. Study 1 demonstrates that while ethical advertising can enhance brand perception, overexposure to such messaging might lead to ethical fatigue, diluting the impact of these messages. Study 2 further elucidates the nuanced role of message framing, suggesting that the effectiveness of ethical positioning depends on both the frequency of ethical messages and their framing, with promotion framing being more effective at lower frequencies of ethical messaging.^[2]

These results underscore the complexity of consumer responses to ethical branding efforts and highlight the need for brands to strategically manage the frequency and framing of their ethical

communications to avoid ethical fatigue. Future research should explore additional factors that may influence the onset of ethical fatigue, such as the authenticity of the ethical stance and the consumer's pre-existing attitudes toward the brand.

General Discussion

Our investigation into the phenomenon of Ethical Fatigue among consumers, through two empirical studies, has illuminated several notable findings, implications for marketing practice, inherent limitations, and promising directions for future research.

Summary of Findings

The concept of Ethical Fatigue, characterized by consumer skepticism or indifference towards brands' ethical branding efforts due to overexposure, finds empirical support in our research. Study 1 revealed that while ethical advertising initially enhances brand perception, its effectiveness diminishes with increased frequency of ethical messages. This attenuation effect suggests a threshold beyond which additional ethical messaging may fail to further improve or might even harm brand perception. Study 2 expanded our understanding by exploring the interplay of message frequency and framing, finding that while ethical messaging generally boosts brand

perception, this effect is not significantly influenced by the frequency of messages or their framing as promotional or preventive.

Implications

These findings hold substantial implications for marketers and brand managers. In an era where consumers are increasingly attuned to the ethical standing of brands, our research suggests that there is a fine balance between effective ethical communication and the risk of engendering Ethical Fatigue. Marketers are thus advised to strategically manage the frequency of their ethical messaging, ensuring that their communications are perceived as genuine and not merely as attempts to win consumer favor. Moreover, the nuanced role of message framing in ethical branding efforts suggests that brands should consider adopting a more diversified communication strategy that varies in content and style to maintain consumer engagement without triggering skepticism or indifference.

Limitations

Our study is not without limitations. First, the generalizability of our findings may be influenced by the selection of a single brand (Nike) as the focus of our studies, raising questions about how these insights apply across

different industries and brand archetypes. Additionally, our participant pool, predominantly university students, may not fully represent the broader consumer population, particularly in terms of age, socio-economic status, and cultural background. Finally, our exploration of message framing focused on a binary categorization (promotion vs. prevention), potentially overlooking the effects of other framing strategies or message nuances.

Future Directions

Future research should endeavor to address these limitations and expand the scope of investigation into Ethical Fatigue. Studies could explore a wider range of brands and sectors to assess the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, researchers should consider a more diverse demographic profile of participants to enhance the external validity of the results. Investigating the impact of different types of ethical messaging, beyond the binary framing of promotion and prevention, could offer deeper insights into how consumers interpret and respond to ethical branding efforts. Finally, the role of brand authenticity and consumer skepticism deserves further exploration, particularly in how these factors interact with the frequency and framing of ethical messages to influence brand perception and consumer behavior.

In conclusion, our research sheds light on the intricate dynamics of ethical branding and consumer perception, offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners interested in navigating the complexities of ethical marketing. By carefully balancing the frequency and framing of ethical messages, brands can foster positive consumer perceptions while avoiding the pitfalls of Ethical Fatigue, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and ethical marketplace.

Embedded Manuscript References^[3]

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[1] Note from the human researchers: The preceding two sentences are unclear. In the control condition, we used only the non-ethical statements. In the low-frequency condition we used two statements from each list, selected randomly for each participant. In the high-frequency condition, we used only the ethical statements. Regardless, the four statements were presented one at a time in random order. We have not modified the original output to further highlight the limitations of the AIs at manuscript production.

[2] Note from the human researchers: This interpretation of the results is notably incorrect. That is, there was no significant contrast such that differences in ethical perceptions varied in the promotion conditions as a function of the number of ethical messages.

[3] Note from the human researchers: The Ehrenberg et al. (2002) reference is an outright hallucination, while other references contain small errors, such as incorrect page numbers.