

Gamification, past habits may impact future eco-friendly tendencies differently

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Green consumer habits may not be impacted by gamification practices,

but people who purchased environmentally friendly products in the past are likely to continue to do so, according to a team of researchers, who theorized that adding gamification techniques to a consumer's eco-friendly purchasing habits would perpetuate green consumerism.

Gamification is a technique that attempts to motivate a person to continue doing an activity, such as purchasing, through features such as loyalty point programs, leader boards and online communities.

The research team, led by Lewen Wei, a recent Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications, Penn State graduate, said the team was interested in understanding the motivational complexity behind people's everyday sustainability practices. The project explored game-based solutions that have the potential to increase intrinsic motivations to purchase eco-friendly products.

"We need a continuous commitment to green [consumerism](#) in order to make a dent in the environmental harm caused by [human activity](#), so it requires a strong intrinsic motivation, especially in spite of many external factors that might constrain their behaviors like the [higher costs](#) and lower availability of eco-friendly products," said Wei, who is currently a postdoctoral researcher at Tampere University in Finland.

According to the team, one of the challenges to maintaining green purchasing practices is moral licensing, which is "a psychological phenomenon that occurs when people perceive themselves as licensed to refrain from [good behavior](#) when they have accrued a surplus of moral currency," the authors wrote in the paper "Gamifying Green Consumerism Websites: Can Gamification Mitigate Moral Licensing and Ideological Resistance to Green Behaviors?" in a recent issue of the *Journal of Communication Technology*.

"A past commitment to green consumption might free people from

continuing this practice for a while because they might feel like they have earned enough credits as a person dedicated to sustainable behaviors thus far, so that it should be considered acceptable if they decide to make some less environmentally friendly options in the future," said Jessica Myrick, professor of media studies and research team member.

In the study, the research team focused on three game elements: avatar customization, feedback on participant's choices and the presence of a community.

"We tested the effects of not only one single gaming element but also the various combinations of them—for example, featuring all three game elements at the same time in one setting—to see whether one game element was sufficiently helpful in facilitating future green consumption, or the amount of [gamification](#) mattered to a greater extent than any one element," said Wei.

Although the research team expected to find that the gamification would affect future green consumerism, they reported the data did not support that theory. The researchers said they believe more empirical evidence is needed to validate the finding. They also said that it is possible that different types of gamification design may result in different outcomes.

"We think gamification is still very promising in increasing people's intrinsic motivations of continuing [sustainable practices](#) and thereby facilitating green consumerism," Wei said.

In contrast, the team expected to observe moral licensing among subjects who had participated in green consumerism, but the data did not support that theory.

"Instead, we found some evidence of moral consistency, that is, for

participants primed of their past green efforts, they reported to be willing to take more concrete green actions," Wei said.

Wei and Myrick said they believe that this research could be beneficial to other researchers interested in gamification connected to environmental and sustainable communication efforts by providing preliminary insights about people's motivational complexities in the process and what can or cannot be done to overcome them with inspirations for future studies. Also, website and app developers and designers could benefit by learning about how gamification is received in the green consumerism context with practical implications about gathering [empirical evidence](#) to understand their target audiences before implementing game-based solutions.

More information: Lewen Wei et al, Gamifying Green Consumerism Websites: Can Gamification Mitigate Moral Licensing and Ideological Resistance to Green Behaviors?, *Journal of Communication Technology* (2022). [DOI: 10.51548/joctec-2022-001](https://doi.org/10.51548/joctec-2022-001)

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