

# **The Formation of Collective guilt: Exploring the Interaction Effect of Environmental Identity and Human Responsibility Belief on Collective Guilt**

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## *Abstract*

With widespread fears of climate change, global warming, and policymakers calling for reducing our consumption, it is important we have an understanding of antecedents of consumers' consumption behaviors that impact the environment. We examined the interaction effect of environmental identity (Clayton, 2003) and perceived responsibility for global warming (Ferguson and Branscombe, 2010) on consumers' collective guilt and its subsequent effect on pro-environmental behavioral intentions. We hypothesized that when environmental degradation is believed to be caused by humans, it leads to a feeling of collective guilt among those who identify highly with the environment. This guilt subsequently encourages environment-friendly consumption behavior. Further, we examined a mechanism by which the feeling of collective guilt may be avoided by some. Those who do not identify with the environment as much, avoid the feeling of collective guilt through moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), that is, cognitively justifying the human behavior that adversely impacts the environment.

The findings of this research, (i.e., the interactive effect of environmental identity and human responsibility belief on collective guilt and then on pro-environmental behavioral intention) imply that intervention strategies aimed at promoting environmental identity can be more effective in inspiring human behavior that will sustain the natural environment compared to the effect of informational campaigns that focus on increasing awareness of environmental problems or enhancing environmental concerns and attitudes.

Further, our results show that the commonly used public service announcement strategy of assigning blame on human behavior for environmental degradation may backfire among low environmental identifiers, who avoid collective guilt with defensive mechanisms such as moral disengagement. Our data suggest that promoting the idea of human responsibility for environmental degradation would be more effective if the concept of feeling a part of nature is also promoted.