

Inner angels and demons and the mobilization of demand for sustainable development
(WP116)

Final Report

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Activity 1

On November 10, there was the Transforum “Multiple Selves and Sustainable Development” Symposium in Amsterdam. The speakers of the symposium each wrote a chapter. This resulted in an edited book of essays, aligning different theoretical perspectives.

Activity 2, research project 1

Janneke de Jonge

Wageningen University

Summary of the findings

The aim of this research line was to investigate the impact of construal level and positioning of product attributes on product evaluations. Building on previous research, it was hypothesized that consumer evaluations of products would depend on the fit between the construal level they were in and the characteristics of the product in terms of attributes. A distinction was made between *want* and *should* attributes, where want attributes fulfill immediate needs, such as sensory pleasure derived from high fat or high sugar products, and should attributes fulfill valued goals in life, such as environmental friendly production of goods. It was expected that evaluations of should attributes would be enhanced at high construal levels, and that perceptions of want attributes would be enhanced at low construal levels. In addition, it was expected that concrete attributes would be better evaluated in low as opposed to high construal levels, and that abstract attributes would be better evaluated in high as opposed to low construal levels.

To test these hypotheses and develop effective positioning and communication strategies for sustainable products, a series of experiments was conducted. The empirical findings showed that construal level influenced product evaluations in a way that was inconsistent with our expectations. That is, across multiple experiments it was found that *want* attributes (e.g., taste) were better evaluated when respondents were in a high as opposed to low construal level, and that should attributes were better evaluated at low as opposed to

high construal level. This pattern of results also emerged when a measure of psychological distance was used as manipulation, instead of construal level.

To exclude the possibility this was due to methodological issues, the experiment that had served as the basis for the conducted experiments within the project (Fujita et al. 2008, study 2), was replicated to investigate whether the same results would be obtained. This study, resulted in the same pattern of results, excluding the possibility that the observed reversed effects resulted from confounds in the operationalization of the attributes. An explanation of the reversed effects that we found is potentially related to the sampled population. Specific characteristics of this population, for example involvement with environmental issues or value structures, could account for the finding that products with a sustainability attribute are better evaluated than products with a taste attribute in the near future. An additional experiment is planned using a different sample to explore this explanation.

To test the hypothesis that concrete attributes result in more positive product evaluations than abstract attributes at low construal levels, and abstract attributes result in more positive product evaluations than concrete attributes at high construal levels, an experiment was conducted where the impact of construal level and degree of abstractness/concreteness of attributes on product evaluations was investigated. The results from this study revealed no significant effects, indicating that we found no evidence for the hypothesis that concrete (abstract) attributes more strongly enhance product evaluations at low (high) levels of construal. A new study is being designed to further investigate the relationship between abstractness of attributes and product evaluation at different construal levels.

Verantwoording

A series of experiments have been conducted to test the hypothesis that at high (low) construal levels consumers will psychologically construe issues in superordinate/abstract (subordinate/concrete) terms, resulting in more positive evaluations of desirabilities, such as sustainable products attributes (feasibilities, such as taste). Unfortunately, the results of a series of experiments with different operationalizations show a different pattern of results. Given the time restriction of this research project, we have not been able to empirically show the underlying reason for the results that we have obtained. Part of the explanation of the reversed effects that we obtained might come from the sampled population. Potentially

Wageningen students are more involved with environmental issues and they might have different value structures, which may cause the reversed response. This may lead to a reframing of the sustainability issue, such that it represents a low and high term goal, resulting in favorable evaluation in both low and high construal levels. Practically this would suggest that the framing of sustainability should (at least partially) be dependent on the targeted market segment.

Activity 3, research project 2

Marret K. Noordewier (September 2009 – August 2010)

Tilburg University

Summary of the findings

The aim of this research line was to investigate whether we could use cognitive consistency principles to increase sustainable consumption. The theoretical background of these projects is that people feel good when beliefs, attitudes and behavior are in harmony with each other, whereas inconsistencies are uncomfortable (e.g., saying one thing but doing another). We reasoned that when favorable attitudes are highly salient, it is likely they will guide behavior ('I like sustainable, I buy sustainable'), because people feel better after consistent behavior than after inconsistent behavior (i.e., 'practice what you preach').

In a series of experiments we activated favorable attitudes towards sustainability using sentences. In pretests, we established that these sentences indeed activate favorable sustainable attitudes. In the studies, participants either read the sentences related to sustainability (experimental condition: e.g., 'do you also think chickens should run around freely?' or, 'do you also want to consume sustainably?') or they read neutral sentences (control condition: e.g., 'do you also like sunny weather?'). The sentences were part of an ostensibly unrelated task (e.g., a study supposedly on the psychological effects of questions) an embedded in several other sentences (to avoid demand effects); or the sentences were printed on placemats that were placed on trays in the cafeteria of the university.

After sustainable attitudes were activated, people were given the opportunity to make sustainable choices. In an online shopping experiment, participants were asked to do grocery shopping. The groceries were depicted on the screen and each product category consisted of various brands, including one sustainable brand (e.g., organic or fair trade). We counted the

amount of sustainable products they choose. In the field study (in the cafeteria), we added several sustainable products to the assortment (e.g., cheese, milk, juice, bread, butter, meat) and counted the amount of sustainable product sold.

Results showed that, as predicted, people consume more sustainable products when their favorable attitudes towards sustainability are made salient as compared to when these attitudes were not made salient. These results suggest that activating sustainable attitudes might overrule other practical reasons on consumers mind (e.g., wants, costs, ease or habits). Practically, this means that making people's positive attitudes towards sustainability salient is an effective intervention to increase sustainable consumption.

Future projects

In addition to the project described above, we also initiated some other projects on the effects of reading/hearing about climate change. Previous research shows that messages on climate change or climate crisis can make people feel uncertain and in a chaotic state of mind (e.g., not knowing the future, not knowing what is going to happen). Because this feeling/state could result in doing nothing (i.e., being passive), instead of acting sustainably, it would be beneficial to find ways to protect people against feelings of uncertainty and chaos. As such, they would be better able to deal with messages about crisis, which would make sustainable behavior more likely. In various studies, we found that boosting this sense of structure is possible (e.g., through movies in which a structured pattern is shown). In the coming months, we plan to run studies to investigate whether boosting structure enables people to deal with messages on climate change, such that instead of doing nothing, they are more motivated to behave sustainably.

Yana R. Avramova (September – December 2010)

Tilburg University

Research projects

We initiated three research projects. We designed experimental studies, which will be run in the next couple of months. The data we collect will form the basis of three scientific articles, which will be sent for publication to international peer-reviewed journals.

Based on our recent research on the basic effects of mood on perception and judgment – in the basic perceptual, social, and consumer behavior domains, we hypothesized that diffuse affective states, such as moods, should influence the way in which consumers perceive and evaluate sustainable product options.

Specifically, our previous work shows that negative mood makes people focus more narrowly on a target stimulus (e.g., a person, a product), whereas positive mood makes people adopt a broader focus, so they also attend to contextual (peripheral) information (e.g., the physical background, alternative product options in the consideration set) and incorporate that in their target judgment. Taking this as a starting point, we started three distinct projects that aim to test the effects of mood on sustainable consumption and behavior.

Project 1: The influence of mood on sustainable consumption and product choice.

Applying our theorizing to the field of sustainability, we hypothesized that people in a positive mood, as compared to those in a negative mood, will be more likely to attend to environment-related information. That is, when people face a choice between more and less sustainable products, positive mood will make them adopt a broader and more global view, which will make global (environmental) concerns more salient. As a result, people in a positive mood will be better able to go beyond their immediate hedonic goals (e.g., get the best looking package, pay less) to see the implications of their choice for others and the environment.

Several experimental (lab) studies were designed to test these predictions. In these experiments, positive and negative mood states will be experimentally induced and then product evaluation and choice, willingness to pay for sustainable products, as well as sustainability attitudes will be measured in several different ways.

Project 2: Mood, social norms, and social influence

Research on social influence has consistently shown that injunctive social norms (what one *should* do) sometimes fail to induce compliance. One reason for this could be that the descriptive norm (what people *actually do*, what is generally accepted) indicates lack of compliance with the norm (e.g., the presence of trash on the street indicates that littering is widespread and is obviously accepted). It has been demonstrated that compliance with the

norm depends on the salience of the focal (injunctive) norm, as well as on the degree of attention to descriptive norm information.

Based on our findings on the effects of mood on basic attention, we hypothesized that negative mood will make people focus on and comply with the norm, irrespective of descriptive norm information. That is, since negative mood induces narrow attention, people in a negative mood will be less influenced by contextual information (e.g., what others do, as indicated by traces of human action; the state of the environment). In contrast, positive mood will broaden people's attention, thus making them more sensitive to contextual information. As a result, if the context suggests that the norm is frequently violated, people in a positive mood will be more likely to "go with the flow", failing to comply themselves. If, however, descriptive norm information is in line with the injunctive norm (i.e., people do what they are supposed to do), positive mood will actually increase compliance.

This research project will not only reveal the general mechanism underlying affective influences on norm compliance, but it will have direct implications for persuasive communication in the domain of sustainability. That is, whether persuasive messages (and any other form of "nudging" designed to induce sustainable behavior) are successful may depend on consumers' moods and how they attend to and process information. We will test our predictions in several experimental studies, where we will manipulate participants' current mood as well as the salience and content of different injunctive and descriptive norms (e.g., the norm to recycle, to save energy, to cycle instead of drive a car to work, to buy certified products, etc.).

In addition, we will specifically test the effects of mood on the effects of scarcity. It has been shown that scarce products are preferred to non-scarce products, when consumers infer that the product is scarce due to its high popularity and high quality (i.e., the "norm" is to buy product X and not product Y). We hypothesize that scarcity cues are one type of context cues that should be more influential when one is in a positive than in a negative mood, since positive mood makes people attend to the context more. In testing this idea experimentally, we will study how mood and scarcity interact to affect sustainable product choice and purchase. That is, we predict that in a positive mood people will be more strongly affected by scarcity cues than in a negative mood, such that if a sustainable product (e.g., biological milk) is scarce, they will be more likely to purchase it. This would have significant practical implications for product positioning and store arrangement.

Project 3: Normalizing “greenness”

There is evidence showing that middle (or “compromise”) options are liked more and chosen more often than “extreme” options. For instance, if consumers have to make a price-quality tradeoff, they are more likely to pick a middle alternative that offers a compromise (e.g., the best value for money). Thus, how a product is perceived and evaluated (and how much one is willing to pay for it) may critically depend on the other options in the choice set.

This may have important implications for sustainable product positioning. It is often the case that “green” products (e.g., organic food, green energy) are marketed with a focus on their sustainable aspect. That is, companies selling biological milk most often stress the fact that the milk is biological, rather than other qualities, such as taste, freshness, etc. As a result, “green” product options are perceived as extreme. Based on findings on the “compromise effect”, we thus hypothesized that less extreme “greenness” would gain a larger market share. In other words, a product that is advertised as being fresh, of high quality, and “by the way / in addition also green” will be more successful than its “extremely green” counterparts. Thus, we will test the idea that “normalizing green” and making it more moderate and subtle may actually increase the likelihood that consumers will choose it over other (non-green) products.

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