Going Green For Friends, Family Or Community?: How Different Levels of Subject Norms and Identity Influence Green Behavior

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Going green for friends, family or community? This paper explores the interacting effect of evoked identity and subjective norms on green behavior. The present research demonstrates that when personal identity is evoked, subjective norms will not have an influential role on green behavior. In contrast, when the social identity is evoked, norms will present a great importance on behavior. However, we demonstrate that this influence depends on the subjective norms level. In contrast with previous research, we found that collective (vs. relational) social norms were more influential on the green behavior, increasing the use of recycled paper.

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IDENTITY-BASED MOTIVATION AND SUBJECTIVE NORMS

Prior research suggests that the self is composed of different levels of inclusion (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). In this sense, Harb and Smith (2008) extend the concept of self-construal (independent and interdependent), suggesting four different layers of the self (personal, relational, collective and humanity). These four levels of self-inclusion can have different importance in consumer decisions.

In this study we investigated how relational and collective subjective norms influence green behavior. According to Goldstein et al. (2008) it is expected that relational norms (family and friends) will be more influential on the green behavior than collective norms (community).

In contrast, construal level theory predicts that individuals in an abstract construal were more inclined to perceive their relevant high-level goals (Freitas et al., 2009). In this sense, conversely to Goldstein et al. (2008) proposition, people would engage on green behavior when abstract norms are salient (collective vs. relational norms). Then, how these different levels of subject norms and identity influence green behavior?

RESULTS

One hundred and fifty nine participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (subjective norms: high and low) x 2 (identities: social and personal) design. Three different ANOVA’s 2x2 were performed for each of the different subjective norms (friends, family and community). In this study, evoked identities were primed through similarities and differences between family and friends task – SDFF (Oyserman and Lee, 2007). Subjective norms were chronically accessed by green subjective norms items (Van Birgelen et al., 2008). High and low subjective norms were obtained by median split of each norm. The main dependent variable (DV) is the behavioral choice between recycled and regular paper. This measure was obtained when participants chose the second questionnaire booklet between a green or a non-green paper option. The interaction of identity and subjective norms in the choice of paper (recycled) was performed using generalized linear models (GLM) binomial distribution in a logistic function.

First, we analyzed the interaction between identity and relational norms. In contrast to expectations, the interaction between identity and friends norms (Wald $\chi^2$ (1) = .78; ns) and between identity and family norms (Wald $\chi^2$ (1) = .78; ns) were not significant.

Second, we analyzed the interactional effect of identity and collective norms. Results provide support for this interaction (Wald $\chi^2$ (1) = 4.42; $p<.05$). As expected, when a personal identity was salient, community norms had not impacted green behavior ($M_{high} = 0.64, M_{low} = 0.68$; ns). Conversely, when social identity was salient, high norms participants reported more green behavior than low norms participants ($M_{high} = 0.84, M_{low} = 0.59; p<.01$).

CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate the hypothesized moderating role of identity on subjective norms activation. Specifically, we show that social identity (vs. personal identity) activates the influence of subjective norms on green behavior.

In addition we investigated how different subjective norms can influence the green behavior. In contrast with predicted by theory (Goldstein et al., 2008), we found that collective (vs. relational) social norms were more influential on the green behavior. In our results, subjective norms were more effective for the layers more distant to the self, increasing the use of recycled paper.

A proposed mechanism for that is social identity activates social goals, making the choice to help the environment something relevant to the communitarian goals (Briley and Wyer, 2001). In one hand, the effects of relational norms (family and friends) would occur in situations where the green behavior could improve the social image for closer social identity. On the other hand collective norms will be more important for green behavior than relational norms because it is a typical pro-social behavior. This could be the reason why collective (vs. relational norms) were more important on increasing green behavior.

These unexpected results can open space for new interpretations. One alternative suggested mechanism is that social identity takes into more abstract way of thinking (Eyal et al., 2008). Moreover, Torelli and Kaikati (2009) found that and abstract (and not a concrete) mindset...
led participants to engage in behaviors that were consistent with an abstract mindset. Then, we expect that the interaction between an abstract identity (social) and an abstract norm (collective) could lead into more green behavior. Further studies can investigate this possibility.

REFERENCES


When Vices Make You Feel Less Guilty Than Virtues: The Discarding of Vice and Virtue Products

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Most people (93%) are guilty of abandoning products they have purchased but never used (Wansink, Basel, and Amjab 2000). Living in this materialistic society, consumers make daily decisions not only about buying and consuming products but also about disposing of them. Depending on the price and the type of the product, consumers may form differential perceptions and feelings toward its disposal. For instance, discarding a jar of spoiled Russian caviar usually induces more regret than dumping a dozen of rotten chicken eggs. As manifested by the sunk cost psychology (Arkes and Blumer 1985), missing the opportunity benefits of the $300 caviar is generally more painful than failing to reap the benefits of the $3 chicken eggs. However, is trashing a $10 pack of cigarettes the same as discarding a $10 bottle of vitamins? This research investigates if consumers perceive and feel differently about the disposal of two relative goods: a vice (product with immediate benefits and delayed costs) and a virtue (product with immediate costs and delayed benefits) (Wertenbroch 1998). We propose that the discarding of a vice induces less guilt than that of a virtue because the former can be justified as “good riddance” while the latter is regarded as “bad rubbish.”

While haste makes waste, so does procrastination. Purchase impulsiveness and consumption procrastination can create huge waste. Owning to their present-biased preferences, consumers are vulnerable to making impulse purchases of vices and putting off the consumption of virtues (e.g., Ainslie 1975; Milkman, Rogers, and Bazerman 2009; Read, Loewenstein, and Kalyanaraman 1999). Thus, decisions regarding the disposal of expired virtues and vices can often confront consumers, who knowingly defer or negligently forget consuming the products, or simply fail to use them because of competing alternatives. For example, many people do their grocery shopping on weekends but barely use their perishables during the week because they are too tired or too busy to cook after work (Jones 2004). Not surprisingly, they eventually find virtues (e.g., broccoli, cabbage sprouts, grapefruits, etc.), vices (e.g., bacon, butter, cake, etc.), or other things go bad in their refrigerators. In fact, “as much as 25% of the food we bring into our homes is wasted. So a family of four that spends $175 a week on groceries squanders more than $40 worth of food each week and $2,275 a year,” estimated Bloom (2010) based on various studies such as the three-decade-long Garbage Project of the University of Arizona. Arkes and Blumer (1985) claim that people fall for the sunk cost fallacy because they do not want to be or appear to be wasteful. Aversion to waste is widely assumed to prevail among consumers (Arkes 1996; Bolton and Alba 2007) because of economic, environmental, religious, ethical, psychological, or other reasons (Lastovicka et al. 1999; DeYoung 1986). Nevertheless, wasteful consumption of foods and other goods remains a tough global challenge (UNEP 2011).

This research first adopts a “refrigerator cleaning” scenario to test if consumers feel differential when finding a bag of rotten grapefruits (expired virtue) and a box of stale chocolate cake (expired vice) in their refrigerators. We employ a within-subject experimental design in which the sequence of the products is counterbalanced. For checking the effects of different price levels, we randomly assigned our college student participants to three price conditions. The first condition provides no price information, while the second (third) indicates $5 ($10) for each product. We ask our participants to imagine being in the scenario, answer Likert-scale questions about their guilt levels for the discarding of each product, and then explain why they feel so in an open-ended question. They also rate how enjoyable or beneficial they normally think about the consumption of fresh grapefruits and chocolate cakes. After rating their preference for some filler pictures for distraction purposes, participants are presented a grocery shopping scenario and are asked their intention for purchasing grapefruits or chocolate cakes. Finally, participants respond to some basic demographic questions and are thanked for their participation.