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Sneakers Made of Used Plastic? How Consumers' Implicit Theories Affect Buying Recycled Products

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We investigate how implicit theories influence consumers' intentions to acquire products made from recycled materials. In three experiments we show that incremental theorists—compared to entity theorists—favor such products more, especially when they think a firm has put effort in transforming the used material to produce a new product.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent times, the reduction of waste and the practice of recycling have become two major topics in the societal debate. While the issue of garbage disposal has been affecting the Western World for the past decades, the global scenario has recently exacerbated due to the increased consumption volume (and related waste) of developing nations. In the past, scholars and policy makers have tried to educate as well as incentivize practices like recycling to avoid reduce landfill stocks and create new objects from past used materials (Reid, 1990). Such products have been commercialized more and more by big brands (i.e. Adidas and Levi's) and by famous fashion designers (i.e. Stella McCartney).

While more academic literature has focused on drivers for consumers motivations to engage in recycling activities (Trudel, Argo, and Medel 2016), there has been little research investigating consumers' underlying psychological factors to favour recycled products over standard ones (Mobley, Painter, Untch, and Unnava 1998). In this study we address this issue by experimentally testing consumer evaluation and intention to adopt recycled products through an implicit theory – or mind-sets- framework on.

Implicit theories are beliefs individuals have about the human characteristics (Dweck, 1999). Some individuals maintain a fixed mind-set (or entity theory), believing that human traits—such as intelligence, personality, and morality—are relatively fixed. According to this mind-set, characteristics are stable and there is not much that can be changed about them (Dweck, 1999). Conversely, people with a growth mind-set (or incremental theory), believe that people can substantially modify their characteristics and that these characteristics are malleable. Learning and experience can in fact foster development and change even basic traits of a person together with its behaviour. In other words, incremental theorists suggest that those who strive to change an aspect of their nature can do so. Implicit theories also shape the way people think about effort (Grant and Dweck, 2003). As entity theorists believe traits are innate and unchangeable, they also tend also minimize role of effort. Achievements are in fact based on traits rather than experience and learning. In contrast, incremental theorists view effort as an important element of human nature as it allows to improve and develop, realizing their greater potential. Indeed, if things come too easily, it means they are staying in their comfort zone and not realizing their full potential. Transferring these views in the domain of recycled products, these kind of items are usually manufactured through a sometimes complicated and highly effortful process, bringing for example a plastic water bottle to become fabric for a t-shirt or a pair of trousers. We therefore believe that individuals beholding an incremental theory will be showing a higher intention to purchase a recycled (vs. non-recycled) product when they perceive the manufacturer to have put a high amount of effort to create the object. Hence, we hypothesize that perceived effort in creating the product mediates the relationship between product type and purchase intention, and that this effect is stronger when an individual is an incremental theorists.

In a set of three experiments we test the effect of implicit theories to consumers' intention to adopt recycled products. In the first experiment we asked participants to evaluate their intention to pur-

chase a standard product or one made from recycled plastic, measuring their implicit theory type. The results showed a significant higher purchase intention for incremental theorists, (i.e. individuals who believe traits are malleable and can change) than for entity theorists (who instead believe traits are fixed and unchangeable). In a second laboratory experiment we manipulated implicit theories product type (recycled vs. non-recycled) measuring individuals' level of appreciation through a single category implicit association test. We found out that incremental theorists preferred the recycled product more than entity theorists. In our third experiment we found how this effect is mediated by consumers' perception of the effort invested by the company to create the product. Specifically, the role played by the effort invested by the company in creating the recycled product mediated the effect on the type of product (recycled vs. non-recycled) on consumers' intention to purchase it. This result was stronger in the case on individuals in the incremental condition than in the entity condition.

Taken together, the results of these studies contribute to the literature on implicit theory by investigating another area in consumer psychology (intention to adopt recycled products) so far unexplored, responding to the call for more research made by John and Park (2016). On a managerial point of view, this study suggests how highlighting the effort spent by a company in creating the product (for example by mentioning the hard work done by their R&D department before the official launch) can attract consumer (especially incremental theorists) to intend to buy the product. Some limitations of this study (i.e. testing the effect on more product categories or ways to make recycled products more appealing to entity theorists) can be investigated by future research.

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