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Consumers' Pro-Environmental Behaviors: the Role of Framing and Emotions

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Sustainability is a central issue for people's well-being, but companies often fail in communicating and selling "green" products. This paper shows that using negative frames in communications activates a sense of shame in consumers, which in turn leads them to choose green products and develop pro-environmental attitudes.

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Consumers' Pro-Environmental Behaviors: The Role of Framing and Emotions

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Companies have been increasingly developing green (i.e., environmentally sustainable) products in order to attract consumers and be appreciated by the society at large (Olsen et al. 2014). Yet, despite the global relevance of the sustainability, little is known about the factors that might determine the effectiveness of communication strategies. Therefore, the issue of how sustainable products should be communicated to win consumers' preferences represents an under-researched area of inquiry.

The present research investigates how different frames companies may use in their communications may produce different effects on consumers' behaviors and pro-environmental attitudes. We first demonstrate that in communicating green products emphasizing positive social effects of environmentally sustainable behaviors (i.e., positive framing) activates pride, whereas emphasizing negative social effects of environmentally unsustainable behaviors (i.e., negative framing) activates shame (Bagozzi et al. 1999; Mizerski 1982; Soscia 2013, Tracy and Robins 2007). Moreover, we show that negative framing is more effective than positive framing at influencing consumers' sustainable behaviors and attitudes.

Two separate studies test the effects of positive versus negative framings on environmentally sustainable consumers' choices and attitudes. Study 1 explores the effect of message framing on environmentally sustainable choice. We manipulated the frame through hypothetical shopping situations involving the purchase of a green product, and then observed the effect of this manipulation on the tendency to choose that option. We also tested whether or not pride and shame mediated that effect, and whether or not the direct and indirect effects of the message frame on choice are moderated by personal concern for the environment. Study 2 shows that, when exposed to unsustainability-oriented stimuli, people feel a sense of shame that increases their pro-environmental attitudes. Moreover, the study analyzed whether or not consumers' disposition to empathize with others (empathy as trait) moderated the effect of the framing used on shame and on individuals' pro-environmental attitudes.

In Study 1 we used type of framing as independent variable, respondents' choice as dependent variable, pride and shame as mediators, and concern for the environment as moderator. We estimated a moderated mediation model by using the PROCESS SPSS Macro (Hayes 2013). Regressing pride on the type of framing, environmental concern, and their interaction, we found a non-significant interaction between type of framing and environmental concern ($p > .50$). Regressing shame on the type of framing, environmental concern, and their interaction, in addition to a negative effect of type of framing ($b = -.53, p < .001$) and a positive effect of environmental concern ($b = .25, p = .02$), we found a significant type of framing \times environmental concern interaction ($b = -.25, p = .02$). A simple slope analysis showed that, when concern for the environment was low ($M - 1SD$), the type of framing had no effect on shame ($b = -.23, p = .22$). Conversely, when concern for the environment was high ($M + 1SD$), reading a negatively framed scenario induced greater shame than reading a positively framed scenario ($b = -.83, p < .001$). To test whether or not shame transmits this interaction effect on choice, we

estimated the effects of shame on choice, while controlling for type of framing. We found an effect of shame on choice that was positive and significant ($b = .65, p = .002$), while the effect of type framing was not significant ($p > .20$). More importantly, we found an indirect effect of the type of framing \times environmental concern on choice, via shame, that was significant ($b = -.16, 95\% CI = -.47, -.02$). The analysis also returned conditional indirect effects. When environmental concern was low ($M - 1SD$), reading a negatively framed, rather than a positively framed, scenario, had no significant effect on choice ($b = -.15, p > .05$). In contrast, when environmental concern was high ($M + 1SD$), negatively framed scenario induced greater shame than positively framed one ($b = -.54, 95\% CI = -1.29, -.15$).

In Study 2 we estimated the moderated mediation model by using the PROCESS SPSS Macro (Hayes 2013). We first regressed pride on framing; the results revealed a positive effect of framing on pride such that, compared to an unsustainability-oriented communication, a sustainability-oriented communication increased pride ($b = .40, p = .013$). We also regressed shame on the same independent variable by showing a negative effect such that, compared to a sustainability-oriented communication, an unsustainability-oriented communication made participants feel more ashamed ($b = -.61, p < .001$). Second, we regressed pro-environmental attitudes on both pride and shame (i.e., the mediators), in addition to framing, empathy, and their interaction. The results showed a positive and significant effect of shame ($b = .33, p = .002$) and empathy ($b = .51, p < .001$) on attitudes. More importantly, the analysis revealed a significant framing \times empathy interaction ($b = -.27, p = .04$). To probe this interaction more closely, we examined this direct effect at conditional levels of empathy. When empathy was low ($M - 1SD$), sustainability-oriented communication, rather than an unsustainability-oriented one, increased consumers' pro-environmental attitudes ($b = .37, p = .04$). In contrast, when empathy was high ($M + 1SD$), people's attitudes did not vary as a function of whether communication was unsustainability- or sustainability-oriented ($b = -.16, p = .39$). Furthermore, the analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of framing on pro-environmental attitudes, via shame, which was negative and significant ($b = -.20, 95\% CI = -.42, -.06$), thus confirming that an unsustainability-oriented communication, compared to a sustainability-oriented one, induces greater shame, which in turn increases consumers' pro-environmental attitudes. In contrast, the same indirect effect via pride was not significant ($b = .04, p > .05$).

Our studies show that negatively framed messages make consumers more willing to prefer environmentally friendly products than positively framed messages. This effect is mediated by shame, which thus appears to be a key emotional driver in sustainable communication. Therefore, to increase consumers' pro-environmental attitudes and preferences for green products, marketers should develop communication strategies that focus on the negative consequences related to unsustainable behaviors.

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