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Temporal myopia in sustainable behavior under uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

Consumers in today's world are confronted with the alarming consequences of unsustainable behavior such as pollution and resource degradation. In addition, they are facing increases in uncertainty due to external events such as economic crises and terror attacks. These two problems are central to consumers' lives, occur on a global scale, and have significant impact on the world's political, economic, environmental, and social landscapes. Contributing to research on persuasion and pro-social behavior, we show in four studies, conducted online, in the lab, and in the field, that these two problems are interconnected. Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that uncertainty leads to lower levels of sustainable behavior in comparison to certainty. Study 2 reveals in addition that this is due to the display of higher levels of temporal discounting under uncertainty (i.e., adopting a more immediate orientation). Finally, Studies 3 and 4 show that emphasizing the immediate benefits of sustainability during uncertainty reverses the negative effect and leads consumers to act more sustainably. Overall, these findings provide valuable implications for policy makers and responsible marketers.

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1. Introduction

People today are confronted with several significant societal problems. One prominent problem is the lack of sustainable behavior. Concerns regarding the environment are increasing rapidly with the growing world population, consumption and globalization that threaten nature and resources by degradation, pollution, and climate change (Botkin & Keller, 2010; Gardner & Stern, 2002; Penn, 2003). Encouraging consumers to act sustainably is a difficult task, as environmental issues are often perceived as complex, abstract and insignificant in terms of their direct impact on consumers (Dietz, Ostrom, & Stern, 2003; Spence & Pidgeon, 2010). A second prominent problem consumers are facing today is the increase in uncertainty in their everyday lives. Due to external, societal events like terror attacks, volatile economies, and intensive migration, consumers are confronted with higher levels of unpredictability and change (Arkin, Oleson, & Carroll, 2013). For instance, people do not know where and when terror attacks will take place (Daase & Kessler, 2007), whether their jobs will be secure during economic recessions (Karanikolos et al., 2013), and how immigration will impact society (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013).

Backed up by anecdotal evidence which shows that an increase in unemployment rates decreases public concern for the environment (Scruggs & Benegal, 2012) and that economic crises result in a deadlock of climate policy (Geels, 2013; Skovgaard, 2014;

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The World Bank, 2016), there is reason to suspect that these two world problems are interconnected. Specifically, it can be inferred that increased levels of uncertainty negatively impacts sustainable behavior. Contributing to research on persuasion and pro-social behavior, the current research offers a novel attempt to jointly study uncertainty and sustainable behavior. Through four studies conducted online, in the lab, and in the field, this research demonstrates how uncertainty negatively affects consumers' sustainable behavior and how this negative impact can be reversed. In doing so, this research goes beyond anecdotal evidence and offers causal support for the link between uncertainty and sustainability. Furthermore, this research sheds light on the underlying mechanism, demonstrating that the negative influence uncertainty has on sustainable behavior is driven by temporal discounting – the preference for smaller immediate rewards over bigger future ones (Green & Myerson, 2004; Halevy, 2008). Finally, and importantly, this research shows that emphasizing the immediate benefits of sustainable behavior can be used to effectively lead consumers to act more sustainably under uncertainty. Contrary to earlier research suggesting that the immediate benefits of sustainable behavior need to be emphasized independent of the context (e.g., Gardner & Stern, 2002; Leiserowitz, 2005; Li, Johnson, & Zaval, 2011), the current research demonstrates that uncertainty is an important moderator (i.e., emphasizing the immediate benefits of sustainable behavior is a fruitful strategy only under uncertainty, not certainty).

2. Conceptual development

2.1. Uncertainty

In light of the omnipresent and multifaceted role uncertainty plays in human life, as well as in research across multiple domains (e.g., marketing, economics, decision-making), it is not surprising that it has been conceptualized in a variety of different ways (e.g., Fox & Ulkūmen, 2011; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Lipshitz & Strauss, 1997). Among the various forms of uncertainty, Fox and Ulkūmen recently distinguished between two key dimensions: aleatory and epistemic uncertainty. Aleatory uncertainty refers to probabilistic variability, which cannot be reduced, and is viewed as random and unpredictable (e.g., whether or not the home team will win a soccer game). Epistemic uncertainty, on the other hand, refers to uncertainty that arises due to a lack of confidence in one's knowledge (e.g., whether or not one has correctly answered a question from the game "Trivial pursuit"). Importantly, Fox and Ulkūmen claim that aleatory uncertainty and epistemic uncertainty are not mutually exclusive. When events involve both forms of uncertainty, such as in unknown probabilities scenarios (e.g., *whether* a soccer team will win and the *chances* that a soccer team will win are both unknown), people feel particularly uncertain (Ellsberg, 1961). This is due to a lack of confidence in one's assessment of the probability distribution.

Uncertainty due to external, unpredictable events (e.g., terror attacks, volatile economies, intensive migration) is typically characterized by a combination of aleatory and epistemic uncertainty. Because of the complexity of the events and the absence of reliable estimates regarding their occurrence and outcomes, consumers are not able to make an assessment of the probability that, for instance, a terror attack will hit their city, or whether their job will be lost due to economic crisis or immigration. As such, uncertainty increases depending on the features of the events: volatile and complex events are less predictable in terms of their occurrence and their consequences, and are therefore more likely to induce uncertainty than simpler, more stable events (Milliken, 1987; Van Horen & Mussweiler, 2014). Importantly, such external events can create psychological states of uncertainty only to the extent that the event is relevant to the person's self (Faraji-Rad & Pham, 2016; Van den Bos, 2001). Therefore, in the current research we define uncertainty as the inability to estimate the impact of external, societal events on one's life, and the inability to predict their associated outcomes.

2.2. Uncertainty and sustainability

Even though the prevalence of uncertainty in consumers' lives has increased and has become one of the defining challenges of modern times (Arkin et al., 2013), little is known about how feelings of uncertainty affect consumer behavior in a variety of important societal domains, such as sustainability. Here we argue that uncertainty may have an unwelcome effect on the serious global problem of unsustainable behavior. Some indirect or anecdotal evidence already points in that direction. For instance, crises around the economy and immigration have resulted in a rightward shift in the political climate, which often leads sustainability issues to be ignored or disregarded (Mayer, 2013; Neumayer, 2004; Yilmaz, 2012). Moreover, the economic crisis of 2008 has played a major role in holding back climate policy, shifting investment priorities from climate endeavors (for example investment in renewable energy) to the protection of financial systems (Geels, 2013; Skovgaard, 2014; The World Bank, 2016). Additionally, due to an increase in unemployment rates, as a result of the economic recession, the public concern for the environment decreased (Scruggs & Benegal, 2012).

But why would uncertainty lead to unsustainable behavior? One possible reason is that sustainable behavior carries a strong future component, as it requires optimizing environmental, social, and economic consequences to meet future generations' needs (e.g., Luchs, Walker Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010; Phipps et al., 2013). As such, research has shown that sustainable behavior increases when a future orientation is activated (Van Trijp, 2014). For example, consideration of future consequences positively predicted the likelihood of commuting by public transportation (Joireman, Van Lange, & Van Vugt, 2004). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis has demonstrated that future orientation is a stronger predictor of sustainable behavior for consumers than pro-environmental attitudes (Milfont, Wilson, & Diniz, 2012).

On the other hand, indirect evidence indicates that increased levels of uncertainty lead consumers to focus on immediate, instead of future, outcomes. For instance, during the 2008 economic recession, the purchase of lower priced products, as compared

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