



I did good, and we did bad: The impact of collective versus private emotions on pro-environmental food consumption



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ABSTRACT

Consumers' food consumption patterns are one of the main problems that is associated with environmental concerns. Emotions play an important role in guiding consumers toward pro-environmental consumption, although it is not clear how the functions of emotions that are experienced due to one's own behavior (private emotions) or due to the behavior of groups to which one belongs (collective emotions) compare. We proposed that due to the attribution bias, positive private and negative collective emotions are the most effective in guiding intentions. Indeed, the current paper shows that positive private and negative collective emotions have the strongest effect on intention to buy organic food in the three studies that are described. This paper offers theoretical implications regarding the function of emotions and practical implications that might be used to encourage pro-environmental food consumption.

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1. Introduction

The world is currently being confronted with a range of environmental problems: animals (e.g., the rhino and the panda) that are threatened with extinction; climate change; and changing ecosystems. Consumers consider the importance of the environment when discussing food choices (Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000), however their positive attitudes do not always translate into behavioral intentions towards pro-environmental food (attitude-intention gap; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). It is important to close this gap, because consumers' food consumption is one of the main determinants of environmental problems (IPCC, 2013; Stern, 2006; Weber & Matthews, 2008). Examples of the most important options to reduce environmental impact of consumers' food consumption are: 1) the refusal of air-transported products (i.e. decreased food miles; Weber & Matthews, 2008), 2) a choice for organic products, and 3) a reduction in meat consumption (Jungbluth, Tietje, & Scholz, 2000).

Emotions are among the determinants of pro-environmental consumer behavior (Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010; Kals & Maes, 2002; Swim et al., 2009). Emotions are used by a range of stakeholders, such as NGOs, marketing managers, and politicians, to promote environmental consumption. Campaigns sometimes focus on emotions that are experienced as a result of behavior that is related to privately experienced events (e.g., a better world starts with *yourself* resulting

in private emotions) or collectively experienced events (e.g., we are destroying *our* planet resulting in collective emotions). Although the stakeholders invest large amounts of money in promoting sustainability, there are no published studies that directly compare the influence of private versus collective emotions (Smith, 1993; Smith, Seger, & Mackie, 2007; Yzerbyt, Dumont, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003) regarding the same context (Smith et al., 2007). The current study extends previous findings by comparing the effects of both positive versus negative and private versus collective experienced emotions that both relate to the environment. This study provides implications regarding the function of emotions in guiding intentions towards buying pro-environmental food.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Private and collective emotions

During the day, consumers make a range of choices regarding which food they will buy or eat. Price, health, convenience, and taste are shown to be the most important determinants of food choice (e.g., Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). Besides these most important determinants, affect-related and environmental motives also play a significant role (e.g., Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000; Steptoe et al., 1995), especially for sustainable food choices (Fotopoulos, Krystallis, Vassallo, & Pagiaslis, 2009; Lockie, Lyons, Lawrence, & Mummery, 2002). Although the relevance of these affect-related and environmental motives differs across consumer segments (Fotopoulos et al., 2009; Onwezen et al., 2012;

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Verain et al., 2012), they generally show to be one of the significant motives for environmental food choice.

A recent body of studies provides insight in how affect-related and pro-environmental motives relate. As already noted in the introduction there is a gap between environmental attitudes and behavioural intentions towards pro-environmental food consumption (Vermeir & Verbeke, 2006). In the context of organic and fair trade food products it is shown that emotions mediate the effects of attitudes on intentions (Onwezen, Antonides, & Bartels, 2013; Onwezen, Bartels, & Antonides, 2014). Emotions thus show to be the underlying guiding force that guides consumers towards pro-environmental choices, because individuals aim to feel good about themselves. This reasoning is underscored by the findings of Sosa, Cardinal, Contarini, and Hough (2014) showing the relevance of emotions besides the factors (e.g., price, taste) of the food choice questionnaire.

Emotion refers to one's specific feelings towards an object, event, or person that last for a short time (Frijda, 1986). Emotions have a valuable function in guiding behavior toward personally valued goals (e.g., Bagozzi & Pieters, 1998; Brown & McConnell, 2011; Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008), including the context of environmental food consumption (e.g., Onwezen et al., 2013, 2014; Verhoef, 2005). Aside from the emotions that are experienced due to a personal event (private emotions), one can also experience emotions after appraising an event that is relevant to groups with which one identifies oneself (collective emotions). For example, people are euphoric when their soccer team becomes a champion, feel disgusted when national soldiers have misbehaved by abusing prisoners, and feel sadness and fear when natural disasters affect one's country, even if they or their families and friends are not directly affected. *Collective emotions* refer to emotions that group members may experience in regard to their in-group circumstances, positions, or the actions that are taken by the group or a few of its members. Regarding the experience of these emotions, it is important for an individual to feel part of, and identify with, a particular group (Smith, 1993; Smith et al., 2007; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The body of research on collective emotions is smaller than the body of research on private emotions. Collective emotions have been shown to be valuable in guiding intentions (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003; Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2006; Schmitt, Behner, Montada, Müller, & Müller-Fohrbrodt, 2000; Swim & Miller, 1999), also in the context of the environment (e.g., Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010; Harth, Leach, & Kessler, 2013). However, there are up until our knowledge no studies that explore the function of collective emotions in the context of pro-environmental food consumption.

Previous studies show that privately experienced emotions (e.g., Bamberg, Hunecke, & Blöbaum, 2007) and collectively experienced emotions (e.g., Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010; Harth et al., 2013) guide pro-environmental intentions; therefore, we propose that both privately and collectively experienced emotions affect buying intention towards pro-environmental products. We hypothesize that: *Hypothesis 1: both private and collective emotions affect buying intention towards pro-environmental products.*

2.2. Comparing the effects of private and collective emotions

As previously noted, there is a range of different emotions: pride, joy, guilt, anger, etc. The most commonly used category to distinguish emotions is valence, in which emotions are categorized as positive or negative (Elster, 1998; Forgas, 1995). Based on the attribution theory we propose that individuals experience more negative collective (than negative private) emotions and more positive private (than positive collective) emotions. We explain our reasoning below.

Attribution theory explains how individuals create meaning regarding their own behavior and the behavior of others. According to Heider a person can make 1) internal attributions, the interpretation that a person is behaving in a certain way because of something about the person (e.g., intellect or personality) and 2) external attributions, the

interpretation that behavior is caused by something about the situation (e.g., time shortage or bad luck).¹ Individuals tend to make a systematic error when evaluating who is responsible for a certain event (e.g., attribution bias, self-serving bias, intergroup bias). Regarding their own behavior, individuals tend to make more internal attributions for positive events than for negative events. Regarding the behavior of others, people are more likely to make external attributions for positive events than for negative events (See Fig. 1). This mechanism also occurs the other way around, such that personal failures are externally attributed and others' successes internally attributed. Consequently, personal behavioral outcomes are evaluated more positively than the behavioral outcomes of others, which increases an individual's self-esteem (e.g., Heider, 1958).

Previous studies show that these effects also occur at the group level, such that the behavioral outcomes of in-groups versus out-groups are attributed differently, which results in a more positive evaluation of one's own group than of out-groups (e.g., Weber, 1994). Additionally, attribution theory is found to be relevant in the context of the environment. Up until now there is no consensus regarding who is responsible for environmental issues. Individuals therefore tend to rely on biases. They underestimate internal causes and overestimate external causes (e.g., I am not responsible, others are; Bascoul, Schmitt, & Rasolofarison, 2015).

We propose that this bias (which affects the evaluation of an event) will also affect the formation of private versus collective emotions, because emotions also occur after evaluations (appraisals) of an event. Previous studies already show that although individuals are part of the groups to which they belong, they experience emotions differently for the self and for the in-group: individuals experience more detailed emotions for the self (Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005) because the self is more well-known than the in-group (Prentice, 1990). The in-group is less familiar and more distant from oneself. Individuals, therefore, are thought to appraise their own behavior more positively than the behavior of their in-group, which results in more positive private emotions and more negative collective emotions. There are no reported studies that compare the effects of valence for private and collective emotions. However, there is a different body of research on self-construal that underscores these propositions. This body of research distinguishes between perceiving oneself as a unique individual (i.e., private self) versus perceiving oneself as a part of a group (i.e., social self). In accordance with our reasoning, these studies show that negative emotions have a stronger impact on intentions when the social self, rather than the private self, is activated (Hynie, MacDonald, & Marques, 2006; Kim & Johnson, 2013; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). We, therefore, hypothesize that: *Hypothesis 2: positive private (versus collective) and negative collective (versus private) emotions are the most effective in guiding buying intention towards pro-environmental products.*

A number of measurement techniques have been developed to explore emotions. Among these approaches are physiological methods that reveal underlying biological responses that accompany emotions (Kreibig, 2010; Sequeira, Hot, Silvert, & Delplanque, 2009) and facial recognition methods that capture and categorize the facial muscle movements that accompany emotions (Izard, 1990; Zeinstra, Koelen, Colindres, Kok, & De Graaf, 2009). These measures have the advantage that they are more objective because they do not need self-report (less socially desirable). These measures have the disadvantage that they only capture basic and general emotional experiences therefore losing information about detailed emotional experiences. Moreover, collective emotions are not yet measured with objective measures.

There are also self-reported questionnaire techniques asking respondents to report emotional experiences themselves (Desmet & Schifferstein, 2008; King & Meiselman, 2010). The present study focuses

¹ Note that this is a simplified version of the attribution theory.

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