



Exploring wasteful consumption

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ABSTRACT

While prior research indicates that most consumers are mindful of and averse to waste, resources are wasted in everyday life. The present research proposes that the establishment of pro-environmental credentials causes rather than reduces subsequent wasteful consumption. Two studies manipulating pro-environmental credentials and involving actual consumption behaviors support the hypothesis. Specifically, participants who had easily recalled their past environmentally-friendly actions (study 1) or who had made a recent purchase of green (vs. regular) products (study 2) were more prone to wasteful consumption of resources (e.g., paper, food). This research advances our understanding of consumer resource usage behavior by proposing a novel explanation as to why wasteful consumption occurs and highlights the importance of addressing the component of resource use when promoting sustainability.

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1. Introduction

Waste avoidance appears to be a prevalent idea in Western societies as exemplified in the adage “waste not, want not.” In fact, individuals may even try to avoid the appearance of being wasteful at the cost of making decisions that are contrary to their own best interests (Arkes, 1996). For example, subjects exhibited a greater preference for the purchase of individual items (e.g., purchasing four sandwiches at \$8 each) over a more economical bundled offering (e.g., purchasing a multi-pack of six sandwiches for \$30 and throwing away two of them) because the latter entailed the residual unused (or “leftover”) utility (Bolton & Alba, 2012). In addition, individuals tend to proceed with a replacement purchase when given an opportunity to trade in a used item with a residual “mental book value,” that is, the purchase price minus the depreciation (Okada, 2001). Individuals are also found to look for reasons to justify why they consume food that has passed the expiration date (Sen & Block, 2009) or why they retain their belongings rather than throwing them out (Haws, Naylor, Coulter, & Bearden, 2012). These illustrations indicate that most consumers are mindful of and averse to waste.

In everyday life, however, resources are indeed wasted. A case in point is food waste; it is estimated that American households waste as much as 25% of the food they buy (Bloom, 2011). Water waste is another example. WaterSense, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency partner program, helps consumers save water and energy by promoting products bearing the WaterSense label, as well as by sponsoring a “Fix a Leak Week,” as the “average household’s leaks can account for more than 10,000 gallons of water wasted every year” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Furthermore, efforts to reduce waste in the workplace have drawn public attention (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, 2015), and the Green Office Certification programs at various educational institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania and Boston University, specifically target waste as a major sustainability category. In all, it appears that resource usage behavior is not entirely consistent with consumer aversion to waste and therefore deserves a separate investigation. Exploring wasteful consumption behavior is particularly relevant in light of public concern regarding sustainability because preventing the generation of waste as well as curbing the inefficient use of resources can significantly enhance conservation initiatives that are already in place.

Meanwhile, various environmentally-responsible practices, such as shopping with reusable bags (Karmarkar & Bollinger, 2015) and recycling (White, MacDonnell, & Dhar, 2011), have been advocated by policymakers and firms for consumer adoption. How does adopting these green practices relate to wasteful consumption? On one hand, taking green actions may activate

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environmental goals that lead to consistent behaviors, and thus, prudent resource consumption (i.e., positive spillover; Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). On the other hand, consumers may feel that they have made progress toward their environmental goals and relax their effort, causing wasteful consumption. The latter may find some support in prior research. For example, Lin and Chang (2012) found that environmentally-conscious consumers were more prone to overusing a green (vs. regular) product (e.g., using a greater amount of an environmentally-friendly glass cleaner than a regular glass cleaner in a single instance), and arguably, to wasting resources.

In the present research, we propose and demonstrate through two experiments involving actual consumption behaviors that establishing pro-environmental credentials is a key component in permitting wasteful behaviors; that is, consumers who are made aware of their previous environmentally-friendly actions or of their recent purchase of green products are more prone to wasteful consumption. Our research contributes to the current literature on resource consumption in several ways. First, this research advances a novel explanation as to why wasteful consumption occurs, thus addressing the inconsistency between consumer aversion to waste and the prevalent phenomenon of wasting in our society. Second, this research presents empirical evidence to show that prior environmentally-responsible actions do not correspond to prudent resource consumption, a finding that is counterintuitive and inconsistent with the positive spillover effect (Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). Finally, while it is imperative to foster pro-environmental attitudes in consumers and to promote green products and actions, our findings attest to the importance of considering broader patterns of consumer behavior, including resource usage, in order to achieve the goal of environmental sustainability.

2. Theoretical background

Waste in consumption can be defined as “the difference between the amount of resources acquired and the amount of resources required for a consumption situation”; it may manifest as taking more resources than needed (the residual will be discarded) or as inefficient use of resources (Zhu, 2011). Over-acquiring resources is only possible when resources are abundant; when consumers perceive the resources as not being abundant (e.g., cooking oil being provided in a large vs. small container), they begin to exhibit conservation behaviors, even in a different resource domain (e.g., turning off the lights when leaving an empty room) (Zhu, 2011). In addition, one reason why consumers' consumption behaviors may not correspond to their conservation intentions or aversion to waste may be the high cost associated with being environmentally-friendly (cf. Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010). That is, while many consumers agree with the importance and long-term impact of sustainability, it may be considered in the moment to be costly, time-consuming, or inconvenient to purchase green products, to recycle or to compost, to change existing habits, and so on. It is therefore simply easier and more convenient to mindlessly waste resources than to deliberately preserve them. Further, in the economics literature, the Jevons paradox and the Khazzoom–Brookes postulate both indicate that the improved efficiency and subsequent reduced costs of using a resource tend to result in increased consumer demand and, possibly, the wasting of resources; this so-called “rebound effect” has been studied in such contexts as residential space heating and cooling, appliances, and transportation (Van den Bergh, 2011). For example, improved fuel efficiency in vehicles may reduce the cost to drive, which, in turn, increases the amount of driving and the amount of fuel used (Small & Van Dender, 2007).

Additional research on resource or product usage also hints at what causes wasteful behavior. Take recycling as an example. The prevalence of convenient recycling options such as recycling bins in offices and on curbsides helps to increase consumers' ability to recycle. However, rather than remaining constant, consumer usage of resources (e.g., per person restroom paper towel usage) actually increases when the option to recycle becomes available (Catlin & Wang, 2013). This increase in resource consumption is an indication of waste because it appears that consumers use more resources and/or use resources less efficiently than they did before the option to recycle was provided. In addition, while consumers have been found to use a greater amount of an environmentally-friendly, or “green” product than a regular product in a single instance, this usage pattern is more pronounced among consumers who are environmentally conscious (Lin & Chang, 2012). These findings, too, point to the possibility of wasteful consumption because consumers may use more of a green product than necessary (inefficient usage); this research also indicates that being environmentally conscious may actually exacerbate wasteful behavior. Taken together, assisting consumers to perform environmentally-friendly behaviors by providing options to recycle and by the availability of green products may potentially lead to wasteful consumption.

Prior research has demonstrated that a previous virtuous choice or behavior may provide a license to subsequently act on an incompatible motive (see a review by Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). Specifically, the research on moral self-regulation suggests that through an active and implicit monitoring of the self-concept, individuals seek to balance their moral self-worth with the potential cost or conflict of interest inherent in prosocial behavior (Mazar & Zhong, 2010; Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). Therefore, after committing virtuous behaviors and securing one's moral self-identity, many individuals may not have sufficient incentive to engage in prosocial behavior and may actually compensate by refraining from doing good in a subsequent context. The phenomenon of such licensing effects has been documented in the domains of political correctness, prosocial behavior, and consumer choice (Merritt et al., 2010). For example, affirming one's positive traits, such as one's caring spirit, generosity, and kindness, decreases subsequent prosocial behaviors presumably because a positive self-concept licenses the individual to act immorally (Sachdeva et al., 2009). Similarly, purchasing green (vs. conventional) products, which affirms individuals' sense of social responsibility and ethical consciousness, reduces subsequent prosocial behavior and even encourages cheating and stealing (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). In the context of the current research, while individuals desire to espouse the values of social responsibility, being environmentally responsible comes at a cost, as previously indicated. Therefore, once consumers establish their pro-environmental credentials by, for example, practicing recycling or using a green product, they are less likely to scrutinize and regulate their consumption behaviors, ultimately behaving in a manner that is less environmentally responsible. In other words, boosting pro-environmental credentials can license subsequent wasting behavior.

Furthermore, when consumers are made aware of their past green actions, this track record is highly relevant to their subjective construal of current resource usage behavior; the usage behavior is often ambiguous (may or may not be wasting) as there is no prescribed usage amount in many situations. We suggest the mechanism underlying our proposition is consistent with the moral credentials model; that is, “good deeds change the meaning of subsequent behavior and may license a misdeed in the same domain via moral credentials” (Merritt et al., 2010). In the same way, consumers who consider themselves to be pro-environmental as a result of previous green actions use their credentials as a lens

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