



No I won't, but yes we will: Driving sustainability-related donations through social identity effects



Guy Champniss^a, Hugh N. Wilson^b, Emma K. Macdonald^{b,c,*}, Radu Dimitriu^{b,d}

^a Enervee Corporation, United States of America

^b Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University, United Kingdom

^c Ehrenberg-Bass Institute, University of South Australia, Australia

^d HBV University College, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Shifting consumers towards sustainable behaviours is difficult, with an attitude–behaviour gap persistently reported. This study proposes a route towards sustainable behaviours that does not depend on individual attitudes or values: social identity forces within novel online brand-convended consumer groups. A field experiment using a fictitious fruit drink brand demonstrates that by assembling an online consumer group and providing it with sustainability objectives, consumers will engage in a sustainability-aligned behaviour, namely donating to social or environmental charities at the request of the firm, irrespective of their individual attitudes. Furthermore, this behaviour is accompanied by an improvement in brand attachment. As these effects are found within a newly-formed online group, practitioners may be able to achieve sustainability objectives through this mechanism even in the absence of well-established brand communities. The study contributes to social identity literature by demonstrating the impact of group identity effects in a consumer context, and by showing a mechanism by which the negative side of group identity – out-group derogation – can be avoided.

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1. Introduction

Broad social change is needed in the transition towards more sustainable economies (Northrop, 2014; Oliver-Solà, 2010). Towards this, many businesses are widening their sustainability initiatives from a focus on the supply chain to recognising the role played by their customers' behaviour, from product choice (Doran, 2008) and usage (Auger et al., 2008) to disposal (White and Simpson, 2013). Furthermore, many firms are extending their interest in consumer behaviour beyond the firm's immediate product life-cycles, encouraging sustainable behaviours such as donating (Bloom et al., 1997) and volunteering time to associated good causes (Aquino et al., 2009; Reed et al., 2007).

However, businesses focusing their sustainability efforts on changing customer behaviour do so with risk (Osterhus, 1997). While supply-side endeavours are predominantly under the control of the business, customer behaviours are subject to the apparent inconsistencies of those who consume the products and services, who frequently report positive attitudes towards sustainability yet appear not to act

on them (Auger and Devinney, 2007; Hirsh and Dolderman, 2007; Kilbourne and Pickett, 2008; Papoikononou et al., 2011). This can result not only in the firm missing its own sustainability targets but also in costly product launch failures and subsequent reputational damage (Luchs et al., 2010).

These risks are well established in the food and drink sector, in which customer behaviour can contribute both positively and negatively to environmental and social objectives (Grunert, 2011; Rutsaert et al., 2015), and changes in this behaviour have proven hard to engender (Verain et al., 2012). As in other sectors, there is a need to establish mechanisms for behaviour change that are more effective than the typical rational communication appeal aimed at changing behaviour via attitude (Stern et al., 1999).

This paper proposes just such a mechanism: the use of social influence within technology-enabled consumer social environments. Specifically, we apply social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and the related self-categorisation theory (Hogg and Turner, 1985; Turner, 1985) in the context of online discussion boards. Social identity theory explains inter- and intra-group behaviours (Tajfel et al., 1971), while self-categorisation theory explains how and why individuals make the psychological commitment to such groups (Turner et al., 1989). We propose and test that social identity can form a mechanism for driving sustainability behaviours without the need to invoke pro-sustainability attitudes. We further propose and test that this mechanism can also improve the consumer–brand relationship, an important outcome as it is

* Corresponding author at: Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University, Cranfield, Bedfordshire MK43-0AL, United Kingdom

E-mail addresses: guy@enervee.com (G. Champniss), Hugh.Wilson@cranfield.ac.uk (H.N. Wilson), Emma.Macdonald@cranfield.ac.uk (E.K. Macdonald), Radu.Dimitriu@cranfield.ac.uk (R. Dimitriu).

possible for sustainability programmes to damage rather than enhance this relationship (Aaker et al., 2010; Luchs et al., 2010). This is particularly relevant for the food and drink sector, a competitive environment in which the brand relationship plays a crucial part in consumer choice (Macdonald and Sharp, 2000).

Some previous work has investigated alternatives to the typical rational communications appeal: product choice, for example, may be influenced by choice editing (Pepper et al., 2009) and by price differentials (Auger, 2003). In this study, however, we focus on a sustainability behaviour that is hard to influence with such techniques, namely securing financial donations from the firm's consumers to third parties such as social or environmental charities – a behaviour which may make an important contribution to achieving sustainable economies.

We conduct an empirical test of these ideas through a novel field experiment, using a representative sample of active consumers within the drinks category. Conceptually, we contribute to the sustainable consumer behaviour literature by showing an approach to behaviour change through social forces. We also contribute to social identity literature by applying group effects within a consumer context. A further contribution is to the social influence literature, testing influence effects within novel group structures. From a practitioner perspective, this study provides marketers with a new way to engender specific sustainable consumer behaviours without the need to target only the subset of consumers with pre-existing pro-sustainability attitudes.

2. Theoretical development

2.1. *The potential of social identity theory for engendering sustainable behaviour*

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1970) seeks to explain why we act the way we do via group membership. More specifically, SIT proposes that our behaviour is influenced as a result of psychological commitment to groups, where specific social groups (whether formal or informal) are indicative of specific social identities (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Social identities are shared by collections of individuals who are similar on salient dimensions (Tajfel, 1978). These social identities can vary in degree of abstraction (Brewer and Gardner, 1996), from the more abstract (e.g. responsible citizen) to the more specific (e.g. local football team supporter). Social identities, which are constantly changing depending on the social context, combine with our more stable personal identity to form our self-concept (Turner and Oakes, 1997), which shapes our behaviours at any given time. Importantly, the sister theory of SIT, self-categorisation theory (SCT; Turner, 1985), proposes that group membership occurs when psychologically committing to that group – that is, self-categorising with the group – will remove social ambiguity. The chosen group presents the individual with a clearer view of how to act within the social environment at that moment, as well as how to act in accordance with the group identity, thus further improving both the 'positive distinctiveness' of the group (Tajfel, 1978) and the individual's position within it. Once one accepts one's membership of the social group, one strives to become the perfect – prototypical – member of that group (Tajfel et al., 1971) by enacting behaviours congruent with the social identity and supportive of the group.

We suggest that these social forces as depicted by SIT and SCT are important for sustainable consumer behaviour for several reasons. First, if our behaviours are a product of our self-concept, which in turn is a product of both personal and social identities, then our behaviours will be highly dependent on the groups we feel we belong to at any moment (Reed, 2002). However, we may come into contact with several groups simultaneously, and with a different set of groups shortly afterwards, so the relationship between attitudes and behaviours is not stable. This view potentially offers at least a partial explanation for the persistent attitude–behaviour gap discussed earlier. This leads to the

second important aspect of a SIT view of consumer behaviour: if self-categorisation with the group is driven by a desire to remove social ambiguity, then individuals will constantly trade off different social groups against each other as they look for the clearest opportunities for positive distinctiveness in their current social context (Hogg and Abrams, 1990). Hence behaviours may vary with social context rather than necessarily aligning with personal attitudes. Moreover, in some contexts behaviours that are considered supportive of an individual's *personal* identity may be abandoned due to the risk of betraying the salient *social* identity (Turner et al., 1989) and thereby marginalising or excluding the group member.

Social influences appear to be at work within many of the technology-enabled consumer environments today, for instance in the peer review processes of such sites as TripAdvisor and Amazon. Whilst behaviours such as reviewing are not overtly sustainable, we observe that they are at least prosocial, in the sense that they involve the outcome of helping others within an implicit peer group to choose. Consistent with this argument, within the brand community literature (Schau et al., 2009; Schouten, 2007) in-community behaviour can be seen as motivated by social identity (Dholakia et al., 2004). Indeed, one of the root qualities of community membership is defined as a 'consciousness of kind' (McAlexander et al., 2002), which, we suggest, reflects the sense of belonging to the group at a psychological level as a result of self-categorisation. A second root quality of brand community membership is a 'moral responsibility' (McAlexander et al., 2002) towards other community members. Again, this can be seen from a SIT perspective as a result of self-categorisation, with group members striving to support each other, as a means to increase the likelihood of the group strengthening its positive distinctiveness.

However, to assign such behavioural influences solely to well-established and well-resourced brand communities risks overlooking one of the most interesting aspects of SIT that has not, to our knowledge, been applied to the consumer context. SIT research reports that such behavioural effects are not reliant on the mature group structures of a long-standing social group, but can be recorded even with the simplest and most modest group structure (Tajfel et al., 1971) and however recently the group has been formed (Levine et al., 2005). Even when participants are allocated arbitrarily to specific groups, in-group favouritism quickly appears (Tajfel, 1970). We propose that this characteristic of group behaviour is important for sustainable behaviour for two reasons. First, the fact that these effects are observed with even the most rudimentary social groups suggests that new groups can perhaps be created with relative ease and with modest budgets. Second, as the resulting group's behaviours are congruent with the identity associated with the group, the ability to create novel groups presents the opportunity to build groups around a specific behavioural outcome that is sought. We now develop these ideas with respect to an example of such a desired behaviour, namely financial donations to good causes.

2.2. *Donating as an identity-supporting behaviour*

As we have discussed, there are many consumer behaviours that have sustainability implications, from product choice to product disposal. For our empirical work we choose one such behaviour, financial donations at the instigation of the brand, for four reasons. First, the pledging of money is a clear example of a behaviour that delivers benefits to others (Reed et al., 2007; Shang and Croson, 2006; Strahilevitz and Myers, 1998; Twenge et al., 2007) and thus it illustrates how sustainability objectives which go beyond a consumer's immediate instrumental and hedonic benefit can be met. Second, many initiatives that are attempting to bring about social change in order to address chronic sustainability issues – whether from a societal or environmental perspective – are dependent on such donations (Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Small et al., 2007; Winterich and Barone, 2011). Third, despite its importance, the extant research shows that requesting financial donations from consumers can be complicated by the negative

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