



Influencing consumers to choose environment friendly offerings: Evidence from field experiments[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to examine a set of ways to influence consumer behavior toward making more environmentally friendly choices. We conducted three different studies to investigate (1) what consumers think would influence their behavior, (2) how several question-based verbal influence strategies nudge consumer behavior in one direction or another, and (3) how question-based written influence strategies influence consumer behavior. The findings reveal a discrepancy between what consumers think would influence behavior and what actually does influence it. In addition, under all verbal and written experimental conditions, influence strategies led to consumer change toward environmentally friendly offerings compared with alternative non-environment friendly offerings. The discussion highlights possible explanations for the results, managerial implications, the study's limitations, and suggestions for future research, with a special emphasis on research into factors that can change consumer behavior.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, a variety of new environmentally friendly options have become available for consumers interested in contributing to sustainable development by purchasing eco-labeled products and services. However, research indicates that consumers do not purchase these products enough to have positive long-term effects on the planet. For example, MacGillivray (2000) found that sustainable initiatives such as eco-labeled products and services, as well as offerings with an ethical and/or fair-trade label, often show low market shares of approximately 1%. Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) found similar behavioral patterns, while Gupta and Ogden (2009) found that only a few consumers who showed pro-environmental attitudes regarding recycling, concern about car pollution, and willingness to pay more for environmentally friendly offerings actually translated these attitudes into corresponding behaviors. Despite retailers' attempts to perceptually position eco-labeled products in appealing and attentive ways, consumer purchases continue to follow traditional patterns (Anselmsson & Johansson, 2007). The disparity between purchase intentions and purchase

behavior was highlighted in a recent article by Grimmer, Kilburn, and Miles (2015), and similar observations have been made by consumer agencies around the world (e.g., Mintel, 2006; Swedish Consumer Agency, 2006).

A common method of influencing individuals' behavior (in order, for example, increase the use of safety belts, the use of condoms, or to help people quit smoking) has been to use information campaigns (e.g., De Bro, Campbell, & Peplau, 1994; Robertson et al., 1974; Siegel & Biener, 2000; Wilson, Kastrinakis, Angelo, & Getson, 1994). Such campaigns have used information in attempts to persuade individuals to behave in ways that are deemed better for themselves and for society at large. Such studies rest on the notion that attitudes will shape behavioral intentions and behaviors (Ajzen, 1991). Unfortunately, social psychology studies over the years have consistently found attitudes to be poor predictors of actual market behavior (for example, Ajzen, 2001), a finding that has repeatedly been shown to be valid for green consumption as well (see, for example, Peattie, 2010). In line with this, a leading grocery store in Sweden reported that only 20% of its customers actually choose to buy environmentally friendly (for example, eco-labeled) offerings over non-labeled competitive brands. From an environmental perspective, the low volume of sales of environmentally friendly offerings presents a challenge where research could play an important and advising role in informing how more consumers could be influenced to collectively engage in behaviors that will help the environment.

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Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate possible ways to influence consumer behavior in order to make it more environmentally friendly. This article applies theories that studies in areas other than ecological food products have shown to have a stronger and more effective direct influence on human behavior than information campaigns (Cialdini, 2008; Thaler, 2015; Ajzen, 2001). The principal contribution in the article is that theories of influence are applied in a retail setting where the question–behavior effect (Sprott et al., 2006) is used to nudge consumers toward the behavior of buying environmentally friendly offerings. Thus, consumer behavior is influenced to increase the purchase of environmentally friendly groceries by means of question-based nudges, in the real-life context of a supermarket. We conducted a total of three studies on the impact of green nudges.

2. Theoretical framework

How can behavior be influenced in an easy but profound way? Several studies have shown that merely asking a question about a particular behavior can influence behavior related to the question (Chandon, Morwitz, & Reinartz, 2005; Janssen, Fennis, Pruyn, & Vohs, 2008; Sprott et al., 2006; Söderlund & Mattsson, 2015). This source of behavioral influence is referred to as “the question–behavior effect” (Sprott et al., 2006).

One explanation of why this works concerns a situation in which a respondent is asked about their intention; pre-existing intentions become more accessible in memory, which leads to increased strength in respondents' intentions and, in the next step, affects behavior (Chandon et al., 2005). Another explanation indicates that simply asking about intentions could signal that someone cares about the respondent's views, which has a positive charge that may carry over to attitudes related to performing the behavior (Chandon et al., 2005). From a broader perspective, both of these explanations assume the form of semantic priming. Priming increases accessibility of the associated content and the likelihood that the associated content will be used in a subsequent cognitive operation increases (Janiszewski & Wyer, 2014). This response pattern has been shown in several studies. For example, Braun (1999) used advertising as a prime to influence a remembered experience of a low-quality product. Participants read promotional material that asked them to imagine a positive taste experience, which led to an increased accessibility of content that changed the recollection of the actual taste experience (that is, from bad to good taste). Berger and Fitzsimons (2008) used semantic priming when they asked shoppers to list eight types of candy/chocolate on the day before Halloween. The dominant color of Halloween (orange) primed brands with which this color was associated (for example, Reese's) and increased the likelihood that these brands would be mentioned. Légal, Chappé, Coiffard, and Villard-Forest (2012) found that priming the goal “to trust” led to greater acceptance of a persuasive message and an increased intention to engage in the advocated behavior. To sum up, in terms of our purpose of influencing consumer behavior toward environmentally friendly purchases, the question–behavior effect and its underlying account of semantic priming stand out as useful and will therefore be applied as framework in our research.

Building on priming and the question–behavior effect, interpersonal processes such as commitment and visibility also appear as powerful ways to influence people to a certain desired behavior (Cialdini, 2008; Fombelle, Sirianni, Goldstein, & Cialdini, 2015; Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010; He, Chen, & Alden, 2012; Hill, Fombelle, & Sirianni, 2016; Motes & Woodside, 2001; Spangenberg, Sprott, Grohmann, & Tracy, 2006). To illustrate, an individual's behavior in a typical study is shaped by information given about the behavior of those around them. Influencing people in this deliberate manner, through techniques that shape human behavior in a desired way, is commonly referred to as ‘nudging’ (Thaler, 2015; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Nudging implies that positive reinforcement and/or indirect suggestions are being used to achieve non-forced compliance, which

influences the likelihood of desired motives in a more effective way than traditional informational campaigns, instructions, legislations, or enforcements (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). For example, nudging implies influencing groups of people in a desired direction by giving small but definitive hints. In line with this, Thaler and Sunstein (2008) showed that individuals are more likely to take the stairs than the elevator when told that “most people choose to take the stairs”. Nudging theorizes that rather simple techniques can have a significant influence on an individual's behavior. A small adjustment in how an activity is phrased can influence the subsequent behavior of others. For example, Huguet and Régner (2009) found that boys do better than girls in a technical drawing class called ‘geometry’, but that girls do equally well or better when the class is called ‘drawing’. Whenever small pieces of information are given, as in the studies above, a question that indirectly primes a subsequent behavior is involved. These types of influence strategies, where informational phrases are used, appear promising in light of the challenge of changing consumer behavior toward making environmentally friendly choices. Below, we identify four influence strategies and describe their conceptual background. All four strategies build on semantic priming and the question–behavior effect. The question–behavior effect leads to our first hypothesis, after which we present four influence strategies and their respective hypotheses, using the question–behavior effect. For an overview, see Table 2.

2.1. The question–behavior effect

As noted above, the question–behavior effect occurs when asking an individual a certain question that leads to changes in that person's subsequent behavior. The effect has proven so strong that it works even for non-normative behaviors such as illegal drug use (Williams, Block, & Fitzsimons, 2006). Research regarding the question–behavior effect has typically dealt with questionnaire items, particularly intentions questions (such as “How likely is it that you will do X?”) (Chandon et al., 2005; Söderlund & Mattsson, 2015; Williams et al., 2006). In contrast, the question–behavior effect was examined in the present studies under the conditions where a retail employee, or a sign within the store, asks a customer a question about their future behavior. Furthermore, we compared the effect of various influence scripts that rely on a question-based nudge. According to previous research, a simple question about a future behavior should guide future behavior. Therefore, based on the literature on the question–behavior effect, we expect that when a supermarket customer is asked a question containing information about the choice between environmentally friendly versus non-environmentally friendly offerings, this will activate dormant intentions that choosing environmentally friendly options is important. This leads us to our first hypothesis:

H1. A question that informs a customer that they can choose between environmentally friendly products and non-environmentally friendly ones will increase the sales of environmentally friendly products compared to baseline sales in the store.

2.2. Signaling

One interesting way to influence people is through the signals individuals send to others. Signaling implies that an individual's behavior communicates the kind of a person they are, or wish to be perceived as (Baca-Motes, Brown, Gneezy, Keenan, & Nelson, 2013; Griskevicius et al., 2010). Baca-Motes et al. (2013) reported that when hotel guests receive a lapel pin to signal their commitment to the environment, they are >25% more likely to hang up at least one towel for reuse. Thus, the number of reused towels by consumers who are sent a small signal about being environmentally friendly increases by >40%. Signaling has also been studied within the context of advertisements, where signals are believed to be responsible for unobservable cues of, for

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