



Original research article

# Going green? The relative importance of feelings over calculation in driving environmental intent in the Netherlands and the United States



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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary environmental campaigns often communicate the benefits of acting environmentally-friendly, assuming that larger benefits will translate into stronger intentions to act environmentally-friendly – a mechanism known as “valuation by calculation”. As such, these campaigns have neglected the possibility that decisions to act environmentally-friendly can also be preceded by “valuation by feeling”, where anticipated positive feelings drive people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly.

Acting environmentally-friendly can be driven by anticipated positive feelings because it can be intrinsically rewarding to contribute to the good cause. Indeed, across two studies we found that the stronger people anticipated to feel good about acting environmentally-friendly, the stronger their intention was to act environmentally-friendly. Importantly, anticipated positive feelings were a much stronger predictor of people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly compared to the perceived quantity of the benefits of pro-environmental actions. This indicates that environmental campaigns that resonate with people’s feelings, instead of exclusively appealing to their calculations, may be an important unexploited route to encourage pro-environmental behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Every day, people make many decisions that have implications for the quality of the environment. The products we buy can be either organic or not, we can choose to go to work either by car, public transport or bicycle, and at home we can control the amount of energy we use through various behaviors, such as unplugging appliances that we do not use or lowering the thermostat. Each of these decisions involves different types of benefits, including environmental and financial benefits, such as reductions in CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions and monetary savings. These benefits are often stressed in environmental campaigns in order to encourage people to act environmentally-friendly, including campaigns that promote energy conservation. But which mechanisms explain the likelihood that people will act environmentally-friendly when communicating these perceived benefits of pro-environmental actions? This paper attempts to provide an answer to this question, focusing on energy conservation as a way to act in a pro-environmental manner.

Currently, many energy policies are based on the presumption that consumers act as rational economic actors, who aim to maximize their financial gains [33]. Yet, people seem to not always act to in such a rational, utility maximizing manner when it comes to conserving energy (see also [33]), suggesting that integrating social sciences into energy research can ultimately help to optimize energy policies [29]. Studies for instance found that environmental appeals can be more motivating than monetary appeals when promoting pro-environmental actions such as checking one’s car tire pressure [7], conserving energy at home [4], or enrolling into an energy saving program [26]. These studies provide initial evidence that when it comes to conserving energy, motives that go beyond narrow economic self-interest might also, or even be more important.

Currently, many environmental campaigns – including those aimed at stimulating energy conservation – are designed under the assumption that the larger the benefits are of acting environmentally-friendly, the more likely it is that people will act environmentally-friendly. Examples are slogans like “Save more money by using this LED light bulb” or “Save more energy by using this standby-killer”. The underlying mechanism that is addressed here has been labelled “valuation by calculation” [17]: the larger the benefits of an action are perceived to be, the more value people place on the action, which increases the likelihood that people

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will adopt the pro-environmental action. This mechanism is rooted in traditional economic theory, where “more is better” because larger (tangible) benefits of the action increase the utility of the action [18]. However, there is another mechanism pertaining to how much value people attach to an action: “valuation by feeling” [17]. Here, how much value people place on an action is driven by how they (expect to) feel about the benefits of that action, which is not necessarily related to the perceived quantity of the benefits. For example, the decision of how much money to donate to save endangered pandas can either be based on calculation (“how many pandas would be saved with my donation?”) or on feelings (“how do I feel about saving pandas with my donation?”; [17]). Importantly, when “valuation by feeling” is the mechanism driving a person’s action – in this example, how much money one donates – the perceived quantity of the benefit of one’s action – how much pandas can be helped with a donation – may not be very relevant. Rather, the action can be primarily based on how one feels about these benefits, which does not have to depend on whether for instance 1 or 10 pandas can be helped [17]. In this paper, we argue that “valuation by feeling” is an important determinant of people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly, and potentially even more important than “valuation by calculation”, as acting environmentally-friendly can be intrinsically rewarding to people.

### 1.1. The prospect of positive feelings

When a person chooses to act without experiencing external pressure, intrinsic rewards in the form of positive feelings can be achieved when the actions itself are perceived as pleasurable [25]. An example is cycling to work, because you find the exercise you get when cycling inherently pleasurable, which makes you feel good. Alternatively, positive feelings can be achieved as a result of doing the right thing [21]. In this case, people can feel good and experience a “warm-glow” out of doing good [2,3,34], and not because the action in itself is inherently pleasurable to do. An example is separating different kinds of waste at home, which takes effort and is not pleasurable as such, but is the right thing to do which can make one feel good about oneself.

People’s decision-making is often based on feelings, which can occur instantly, without any form of reasoning occurring before these feelings [41]. Particularly moral decision-making often is not based on reasoned arguments and considerations, but appears to be mainly based on people’s feelings [16]. Pro-environmental behavior is typically seen as moral behavior, as such behavior benefits other people, future generations and the environment [11]. As doing the right thing can elicit positive feelings, the prospect of feeling good when acting environmentally-friendly might in itself make it more likely that people will act accordingly. Indeed, an intrinsic motivation to do the right thing appears to be an important predictor of pro-environmental actions [23,30,32,39]. This implies that people might base the value they place on acting environmentally-friendly on anticipated feelings, in which case “valuation by feeling” – rather than “valuation by calculation” – should be an important mechanism determining people’s decision whether or not to act pro-environmentally.

There is some circumstantial evidence in the environmental domain to suggest that anticipated positive feelings can indeed drive pro-environmental behavior. For example, appeals that stressed the environmental benefits of tire pressure checks for one’s car were more effective than appeals that stressed financial benefits, possibly because people expected to feel better when complying to environmental appeals rather than complying to economic appeals [7].

The first aim of the paper is to determine whether the mechanism of “valuation by feeling” can affect the likelihood that people will act environmentally-friendly in addition to the effect of “valu-

ation by calculation”. Hence, we test whether anticipated positive feelings indeed affect people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly, while controlling for the effect of the perceived quantity of the benefits of acting environmentally-friendly.

In doing so, we can also compare the relative impact of “valuation by feeling” as compared to “valuation by calculation”. If “valuation by feeling” indeed drives people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly, does this imply that “valuation by calculation” will have little or no effect on people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly? If “valuation by feeling” is the main mechanism driving people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly, anticipated positive feelings will be a stronger predictor of this intention than the perceived quantity of the benefits of acting environmentally-friendly.

### 1.2. Is acting environmentally-friendly worth the effort?

A second aim of the paper is to gain more insights into the process through which the two valuation mechanisms affect the likelihood that people will act environmentally-friendly. We do so by looking at the extent to which people perceive the benefits of pro-environmental actions to be worth the effort. Determining whether certain benefits of pro-environmental behavior are worth the effort implies that an elaborated process is instigated in order to make this determination (“Is doing this worth the effort?”). The concept of valuation implies that the subjective value of a certain action is based on a weighing of perceived prospected benefits and costs [35]. The higher the perceived benefits are relative to the perceived costs, the more worth the effort people will find the relevant environmentally-friendly actions, which can make it more likely that they will act accordingly [12]. But what makes these benefits worth the effort?

Our reasoning implies that benefits of pro-environmental actions can be perceived to be worth the effort for different reasons. When “valuation by calculation” is the dominant mechanism affecting environmental decision-making, pro-environmental actions may be particularly seen as worth the effort when people perceive more benefits. The larger the quantity of the benefits is perceived to be, the more worth the effort it is to achieve these benefits by acting environmentally-friendly. Yet, when “valuation by feeling” is the dominant mechanism, achieving certain benefits by acting environmentally-friendly can be perceived as more worth the effort, the more people anticipate they will feel good after acting environmentally-friendly. Hence, determining the extent to which benefits of pro-environmental actions are perceived as worth the effort might be part of the underlying process of both “valuation by feeling” and “valuation by calculation” affecting the likelihood that people will act environmentally-friendly. Both mechanisms can affect the extent to which people consider the benefits of acting environmentally-friendly as worth the effort, which subsequently affects people’s intention to act environmentally-friendly.

An elaborated process of determining how worth the effort certain benefits of pro-environmental actions are fits well with the mechanism of “valuation by calculation”, as some degree of elaboration is needed to determine how large a certain benefit is. But does “valuation by feeling” always operate via elaboration as well? Research revealed that feelings can affect people’s decision-making on both conscious and unconscious levels [5]. When feelings affect decisions on a more conscious level, they affect behavior via a more elaborated process. However, feelings can also drive people’s decision-making without elaboration in situations where feelings affect decision-making more unconsciously. Indeed, anticipated feelings can affect people’s behavior without much elaboration (e.g. [20,28]). In this case, people might not reason extensively how worth the effort they find the benefits of acting environmentally-friendly before determining whether to act

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