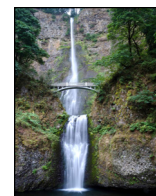




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Focusing on the forest or the trees: How abstract versus concrete construal level predicts responses to eco-friendly products

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ABSTRACT

In this research, we propose that, by their very nature, issues linked to environmental sustainability feel psychologically distant to people. Because of this, the mindset that an individual holds can predict reactions to eco-friendly products. Across five experiments, the authors demonstrate that construing information at an abstract (vs. concrete) level is associated with more positive reactions to eco-friendly products. This differential response is driven by the fact that an abstract construal is compatible with a focus on the future. Eco-friendly products can potentially be made somewhat more appealing to individuals with a concrete construal by strategically altering communications about these products to match this construal. We demonstrate that this can be accomplished by presenting detailed, concrete information about the sustainable attributes of the product. We also present results suggesting that explicitly framing communications about eco-friendly products to focus on the present (vs. the future) may accomplish the same goal.

1. Introduction

Although people often report positive attitudes towards sustainable products and behaviors (Prothero et al., 2011), behavioral responses to these goods in the marketplace are not uniformly positive (e.g., Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2014; Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010), and it can be difficult to encourage individuals to consistently act in a sustainable manner (Steg & Vleck, 2009; Trudel & Argo, 2013). Why would this be the case? The current research provides one answer to why it can be difficult to encourage individuals to make eco-friendly product choices by investigating the way in which the construal level (i.e., concrete vs. abstract) held by the individual is related to intentions and behaviors towards products with environmentally sustainable attributes (i.e., eco-friendly products).

Past research offers multiple explanations for why responses to sustainable options are not always positive. One possibility lies in the relative price premium for eco-friendly products. Although some consumers report being willing to pay more for sustainable goods (Trudel & Cotte, 2009), others are reluctant to pay a premium for environmentally-friendly products (Clifford & Martin, 2011). Academic research has explored other reasons why people may be reluctant to purchase green products, including concerns about efficacy in product categories where strength is valued (Luchs et al., 2010), variations in

self-accountability (Peloza, White, & Shang, 2013), and unreliable memory that a product has poor performance on sustainability-related attributes (Reczek, Irwin, Zane, & Ehrich, 2018).

In the current research, we propose a novel explanation for why some people respond more positively to eco-friendly products than others. We suggest that the nature of eco-friendly products (i.e., the fact that purchasing and using them instead of traditional products benefits subsequent generations sometime in the future) may, at times, be incongruent with the individual's mindset in the current decision context. Specifically, we draw on construal level theory (CLT; Trope & Liberman, 2003) to propose that construing information at an abstract level is associated with greater purchase intentions and more positive reactions to sustainable products than construing information at a concrete level. We further theorize that individuals who construe information more abstractly are more likely to focus on the future, which makes salient the long-term benefits of purchasing eco-friendly products (and the potential future harm of purchasing traditional products) in the present. This ability to focus on the future in an abstract mindset is associated with more positive evaluations of, greater purchase intentions towards, and increased choice of eco-friendly products (relative to those with a concrete construal).

This research builds on past CLT work that has examined responses to different types of product characteristics including primary versus

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secondary features (Trope & Liberman, 2010), the desirability and feasibility of product attributes (Trope, Liberman, & Wakslak, 2007), and brand extension fit (Kim & Roedder John, 2008). We do so by viewing eco-friendly products via the lens of CLT. To our knowledge, past research has not investigated the interplay between consumer construals and reactions to eco-friendly versus traditional products. Instead, past work has shown that matching a loss frame and concrete construal, as well as matching a gain frame and abstract construal, leads to more sustainable behaviors (White, MacDonnell, & Dahl, 2011) and greater choice of eco-friendly products (Chang, Zhang, & Xie, 2015). Other researchers have demonstrated that highlighting economic (vs. self-transcendent) benefits reduces consumer interest in eco-friendly products when the consumer is in an abstract mindset (Goldsmith, Newman, & Dhar, 2016). Our work differs from this extant work in that we look at the nature of eco-friendly options themselves as being perceived as more abstract.

2. Construal level and interest in eco-friendly products

Construal level theory (CLT) proposes that the same object or event can be construed at different levels of abstraction (Trope & Liberman, 2003). A concrete construal is one that tends to be represented in terms of specific, subordinate, and contextualized features. On the other hand, an abstract construal is one that represents events in terms of general, superordinate, and decontextualized features (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope, 1989). According to CLT, the more psychological distance an object has from the individual, the more likely it is to be construed at a higher level of abstraction. Psychological distance can be characterized on multiple dimensions including temporal distance, physical distance, social distance, and hypotheticality (Trope et al., 2007). Research has demonstrated that people tend to use a more abstract, high-level construal when evaluating and making decisions about psychologically distant targets (Irmak, Wakslak, & Trope, 2013; Liberman & Trope, 1998; Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002). For example, targets are more likely to be represented abstractly and to be influenced by superordinate goals when temporal distance is heightened (Liberman & Trope, 1998). On the other hand, when evaluating and making decisions about psychologically proximal targets, individuals tend to use a more concrete, low-level construal that represents the target in terms of incidental characteristics and subordinate goals. Of note, research has characterized construal level as both an individual difference variable, such that people differ in the extent to which they chronically view the world with an abstract versus concrete mindset (Vallacher & Wegner, 1989), and as a temporary mindset that can be experimentally manipulated (Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; White et al., 2011).

Drawing on this extant research, we make the novel prediction that individuals who construe information at an abstract level exhibit a greater preference for eco-friendly products than individuals who construe information at a concrete level. By their very nature, sustainable choices involve putting aside more proximal, immediate, individual interests in lieu of actions that confer benefits that are more distal, future-focused, and other-oriented (Spence & Pidgeon, 2010; Spence, Poortinga, & Pidgeon, 2012). We thus propose that sustainable options might be more congruent with an abstract, rather than concrete mindset. Consistent with this view, research has demonstrated that an individual's morals and values impact their behavior more when they are in an abstract versus concrete mindset (Eyal, Sagristano, Trope, Liberman, & Chaiken, 2009). Drawing on this past work, then, we expect that eco-friendly products often are construed as being more psychologically distant and abstract than traditional product options. Moreover, we propose that there will be a matching effect, wherein people who construe information at an abstract as opposed to concrete level, will exhibit more positive intentions and behaviors towards eco-friendly (vs. traditional) products.

In further support of this prediction, past research demonstrates that

positive evaluations tend to emerge when individuals are confronted with information that is congruent (vs. incongruent) with their extant mindset (i.e., a gain frame and an abstract construal, as in White et al., 2011, or a promotion focus and an abstract mindset, as in Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010). In our context, we propose that a different type of fit effect might emerge on the basis of the underlying perceived psychological distance of the target object based on its eco-friendly attributes and the construal level of the observer. Given that the benefits of eco-friendly products are more psychologically distant than those of traditional products, they are congruent with the processing style exhibited by an individual in an abstract as opposed to a concrete mindset. Following from work that shows that such congruent processing leads to more positive evaluations, intentions, and behaviors, we propose that:

H1a. Relative to those with a chronic concrete construal level, people who construe information at an abstract level express greater purchase intentions towards eco-friendly products.

H1b. Construal level and product type interact to influence product preference such that an abstract (vs. concrete) construal is positively associated with preference for eco-friendly products. However, construal level is not associated with preference for traditional products.

Not only are eco-friendly products generally associated with abstract as opposed to concrete mindsets, they are also particularly compatible with a focus on the future. As noted above, the notion of sustainable, eco-friendly products inherently represents a temporal conflict in decision-making. In most instances, the long-term sustainability-related benefits of purchasing an eco-friendly product are not immediately seen, but rather have some kind of abstract impact sometime in the future, often for future generations. We predict that individuals who are in abstract mindsets respond more favorably to eco-friendly options than individuals in a concrete mindset because the former are more likely to focus on the future. Past work shows that abstract (vs. concrete) construals lead to interpretations of events in ways that reflect greater temporal distance (Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007).

Thus, evidence suggests that there exists an automatic association between abstract construals and the future. In our context, we propose that abstract construals will be associated with a greater focus on the future which will, in turn, make individuals more accepting of eco-friendly as opposed to traditional options. In other words, we are predicting a moderated mediation, such that construal will influence responses to products via future focus only for eco-friendly products. We therefore make the following predictions:

H2. Individuals with abstract (vs. concrete) construal demonstrate a greater future focus.

H3. Future focus will mediate the effect of construal level on purchase intentions only for eco-friendly (and not for traditional) products.

We test these initial hypotheses across three studies. In study 1a, in a test of [hypothesis 1a](#), participants made a real choice between two granola bars, where one is positioned as eco-friendly and one is positioned with a traditional health/taste positioning. In this study, participants with chronic abstract (vs. concrete) construals are more likely to choose a sustainably positioned granola bar than a traditionally positioned granola bar. In study 1b we demonstrate that consumers who chronically construe information abstractly (vs. concretely) express greater purchase intentions for eco-friendly automobile tires but not traditional tires, thus testing [hypothesis 1b](#). Study 2 offers an additional test of [hypothesis 1b](#) in a third product category, household cleaners, and also demonstrates the importance of temporal distance by showing that the effect proposed in [hypothesis 1b](#) is mediated by the greater focus on the future of individuals with an abstract construal, thus testing [hypotheses 2 and 3](#).

After providing support for our first three hypotheses in studies 1

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