



## Follow the signal: When past pro-environmental actions signal who you are



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### ABSTRACT

Research has shown that past pro-environmental actions can promote as well as inhibit subsequent environmentally-friendly behaviour. When are past pro-environmental actions likely to lead to more environmentally-friendly behaviour? We propose this depends on the extent to which initial actions are linked to people's environmental self-identity. We hypothesise that past pro-environmental actions are more likely to influence one's environmental self-identity when the behaviour implies something about you. As expected, environmental self-identity was stronger when the initial behaviour more strongly signals that you are a pro-environmental person. The signalling strength of previous pro-environmental actions was high when people considered a wide range of past pro-environmental actions, or when the initial behaviour was difficult and unique. Our results suggest that pro-environmental behaviour can be promoted by reminding people of their past pro-environmental actions, particularly when these actions strongly signal that one is a pro-environmental person, thereby strengthening environmental self-identity.

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### 1. Introduction

Many people regularly engage in different pro-environmental actions such as bringing their glass bottles to the recycling bin or lowering their thermostat when they leave their house. But can such actions increase the likelihood that someone makes subsequent pro-environmental choices as well? For example, if someone just recycled waste will that person also be more likely to choose sustainable products if he or she goes shopping afterwards? Or would it rather increase the likelihood that someone will choose the cheap and unsustainable option in a subsequent choice, as they already did their bit?

Research has shown that our past pro-environmental actions can promote future pro-environmental actions. For example, a Danish longitudinal correlational study on consumer behaviour showed that engagement in pro-environmental actions is related to engagement in other pro-environmental behaviours the following years (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003). Also, in experimental studies people were more likely to choose sustainable products after they were reminded of a range of pro-

environmental actions they often perform (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008; Van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2014). Past pro-environmental behaviour may thus promote subsequent environmentally-friendly actions. However, in some cases past pro-environmental behaviour did not lead to more pro-environmental behaviour or even resulted in less environmentally-friendly behaviours. For example, in the study on consumer behaviour by Thøgersen and Ölander (2003) mentioned earlier, there was no or even a negative relationship between some environmentally-friendly behaviours in one year and pro-environmental actions in the following years, suggesting that engaging in some pro-environmental behaviours in one year did not promote or even inhibited some subsequent pro-environmental actions (Thøgersen & Ölander, 2003). Also, research on moral licensing suggests that past pro-environmental behaviours may inhibit rather than promote future pro-environmental actions, as people may feel licensed to act immorally after their good deed (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). This suggests that past pro-environmental actions may promote subsequent environmentally-friendly behaviour (i.e., positive spill-over), but also inhibit future pro-environmental behaviour (i.e., negative spill-over; Thøgersen & Crompton, 2009). Therefore, an important question is: When do pro-environmental actions lead to more environmentally-friendly behaviours and when is this less or even not likely to be the case?

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### 1.1. Environmental self-identity

We propose that the extent to which past pro-environmental actions will promote future pro-environmental behaviour depends on the level to which the initial actions are linked to one's self-concept, and more particularly, to one's environmental self-identity. Environmental self-identity can be defined as the extent to which people see themselves as an environmentally-friendly person. Research has shown that a stronger environmental self-identity increases the likelihood that one engages in pro-environmental behaviour, and that environmental self-identity is an important predictor of pro-environmental behaviour. For example, people with a strong environmental self-identity are more likely to conserve energy, reduce waste, and eco-shop (Whitmarsh & O'Neill, 2010), are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours, recycle, buy fair trade products and refrain from flying to a holiday destination (Gatersleben, Murtagh, & Abrahamse, 2012), and use less energy, are more likely to use green energy, choose more sustainable products and use paper more economically (Van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2013; Van der Werff et al., 2014).

In addition, research has found that reminding people of their past pro-environmental actions can strengthen their environmental self-identity, which in turn promotes subsequent pro-environmental behaviour (Van der Werff et al., 2014). When people were reminded of eight pro-environmental behaviours they often perform, their environmental self-identity was strengthened and they were more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours afterwards, while the opposite was true for people who realised that they often do not engage in environmentally-friendly behaviours. Yet, environmental self-identity only seemed to be malleable to some extent, as it also depends on values, which are considered to be relatively stable (Gatersleben et al., 2012; Van der Werff et al., 2013, 2014). Indeed, values appeared to be a significant predictor of environmental self-identity even after reminding people of their previous pro-environmental actions (Van der Werff et al., 2014).

Past pro-environmental actions may thus strengthen one's environmental self-identity and thereby promote subsequent environmentally-friendly behaviour, if people often engage in these behaviours. But which other factors influence whether past pro-environmental behaviour strengthen one's environmental self-identity? Do people need to be reminded of various pro-environmental actions as was the case in the study described above? Or is it sufficient to remind people of one past pro-environmental action? And can it be any type of pro-environmental behaviour or should it be a particular type of pro-environmental behaviour in order to influence one's environmental self-identity? The aim of this research is to study which factors influence the extent to which past pro-environmental actions strengthen environmental self-identity, thereby promoting subsequent pro-environmental actions. When environmental self-identity is rooted in values and thus has a stable component, it is probably not changed by just reminding people of any pro-environmental action. We propose that the more past environmental behaviour implies something about you, that is, the more strongly the behaviour signals your identity, the more it will influence environmental self-identity. This suggests that the extent to which environmental self-identity is influenced by previous environmental actions depends on the signalling strength of that behaviour.

### 1.2. When does past behaviour have a signalling function?

According to attribution theory, past behaviour can signal someone's traits or motivations (Kelley, 1973; Kelley & Michela,

1980). We use information about other's actions and the circumstances under which it occurs to explain the cause of their behaviour. The behaviour is either attributed to internal characteristics of the person (such as personality traits or motivations) or to external factors (Kelley, 1967). Attribution theory mainly focuses on inferences about other people's behaviour. However, following self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), we propose that people also make inferences about their own behaviour. Therefore, your own past behaviour may signal to yourself what type of person you are in a similar way, thereby affecting the strength of your self-identity.

We propose that three types of information about pro-environmental behaviour influence whether you think a particular behaviour signals who you are and hence, whether you attribute your behaviour to internal factors. More specifically, we suggest that people are more likely to attribute their own behaviour to internal factors when (1) they perform a range of pro-environmental behaviours instead of only one, and particularly when these behaviours reflect different types of pro-environmental behaviours instead of very similar behaviours, (2) not many other people perform the behaviour(s), and (3) when it is rather difficult to perform the pro-environmental action(s). If you perform many different environmentally-friendly behaviours, that are difficult and performed by few others, you are more likely to attribute this behaviour to internal factors and to see yourself as a type of person who acts in an environmentally-friendly way. This implies that your previous pro-environmental actions will particularly strengthen your environmental self-identity when the signalling strength of the initial behaviour is higher. On the basis of this, we first hypothesised that environmental self-identity will particularly be strengthened, compared to not performing any pro-environmental actions, when one engages in many pro-environmental behaviours rather than engaging in a single behaviour only, as the former is more likely to signal who you are. However, we expect that a range of past pro-environmental behaviours is particularly likely to signal who you are when it concerns a variety of past pro-environmental actions (compared to rather similar actions). For example, when you perform environmentally-friendly actions with regard to transport, recycling, as well as energy use, the behaviours will signal more about your environmental self-identity than when you only engage in actions that all concern switching off appliances.

Second, we hypothesised that the signalling strength of behaviour is higher when only few others perform the behaviour. Hence, we propose that the effect of past pro-environmental actions on one's environmental self-identity is likely to depend on the uniqueness of the behaviour. When few people perform a certain pro-environmental behaviour, this behaviour is more likely to be an indication of that person's environmental self-identity than when many others perform that behaviour. After all, if everyone does it, you may not perform the behaviour because you find it important, but for other reasons. For example, you may simply follow the norm, or acting in a pro-environmental manner may simply be the most attractive option. Research indeed showed that when a product is highly unique, it is more likely to influence the impression people have of the owner (Belk, 1981). We expect that this will also be the case for pro-environmental behaviours and how this affects one's self-concept: The more unique your behaviour is (that is, the fewer others perform it), the more strongly it will influence how you see yourself.

Third, we hypothesised that the difficulty of the pro-environmental behaviour influences the extent to which behaviour signals your identity. The more effort it takes you to perform a certain pro-environmental action, the more the behaviour will signal your environmental self-identity. Some initial support for

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