



## A green paradox: Validating green choices has ironic effects on behavior, cognition, and perception



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- We demonstrate ironic behavioral effects of validating green choices.
- Positive feedback on green choices leads to behaving less green (recycling less).
- We show that differential states of goal completeness account for this effect.

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### ABSTRACT

Does validating the purchase of green products hamper subsequent green behaviors in people committed to the identity goal of being green? Positive feedback on purchasing green products led to less recycling compared to negative feedback, with no feedback participants lying in between (Study 1). Assuming that receiving positive feedback on buying green products results in a state of goal completeness, we hypothesized and observed that constructs (e.g., earth) related to being green were the least accessible in positive feedback participants as compared to no feedback and (even more so) to negative feedback participants (Study 2). This pattern of results also emerged with respect to the perception of the color green (i.e., a green patch was perceived the least green by positive feedback participants; Study 3). These findings suggest that being praised for buying green creates a state of goal completeness that hampers subsequent striving for the aspired-to identity goal.

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### Introduction

Over the last decade, environmentalism has grown in prominence in the political and social agenda. Although consumers are generally receptive to and concerned about environmental issues (World Business Council for Sustainable Development [WBCSD], 2008), reports indicate that consumers are not adjusting their behaviors to the challenges posed by sustainable consumption. For example, it seems that after adopting a greener energy source, consumers less frequently adjust the use of air conditioning compared to before (WBCSD, 2008). Similarly, consumers who switched to a hybrid car tend to drive more miles than owners of gas-powered cars (WBCSD, 2011).

To elucidate such phenomena, we propose and test the possibility that positive feedback on having made green choices will hamper subsequent green behaviors. Relying on self completion theory (SCT; Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982), we argue that validating (vs. questioning)

the choice to buy eco-friendly products (e.g., compact fluorescent light-bulbs) creates a state of completeness with respect to the goal of being green, and as a consequence, people are less (vs. more) likely to engage in eco-friendly behaviors (e.g., switching off the lights in unused rooms).

Given its theoretical and practical relevance, it is not surprising that an emerging stream of research has looked at issues related to sustainability and green consumption. Correlational research in environmental psychology has examined the relationship between attitudes and eco-friendly behaviors (e.g., Mannetti, Pierro, & Livi, 2004; McCarty & Shrum, 2001). Experimental research in social psychology has looked at what types of social norms are more effective in bolstering pro-environmental efforts (i.e., injunctive norms—what people typically approve or disapprove—aligned with descriptive norms—what people typically do; e.g., Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993; Cialdini, 2003; Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). More recently, research in consumer psychology has examined the effects of being exposed to (vs. selecting) sustainable products on the likelihood to subsequently engage in dishonest behaviors (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Finally, research in economics has looked at rebound effects, which refer to the potential adverse consequences of an increase in demand for a certain (eco-

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friendly) technology due to a decrease in its costs (Small & Van Dender, 2007; Sorrell, Dimitropoulos, & Sommerville, 2009). For example, if technology advances lower the cost of driving because of higher fuel efficiency, more people will drive, and the associated increase in fuel usage will in turn have negative consequences for the environment (Small & Van Dender, 2007).

No prior work has however examined the effect of validating (vs. questioning) consumers' shopping choices and empirically analyzed the association between such feedback and subsequent compensatory behavior. In particular, the present research extends self completion theory to the domain of consumer psychology and tests the hypothesis that environment-conscious individuals who receive favorable (unfavorable) feedback on their shopping choices will subsequently behave with less (more) regard for the environment. In Study 1, we tested the hypothesis at the level of overt behavior, and found that participants were less likely to recycle upon receiving favorable feedback. In Studies 2 and 3, we investigated whether the behavioral pattern observed in Study 1 corresponds to differential levels of goal completeness, as is postulated by SCT. To this aim, we employed an implicit measure traditionally used in research on goals (i.e., a lexical decision task; Study 2), as well as a measure of motivated perception (i.e., distorted perception of the color green; Study 3).

### Self completion theory

Self completion theory (SCT) posits that individuals committed to a certain identity goal (e.g., endorsing a green lifestyle, being a great mother, aspiring to become a successful businessman) can engage in a variety of activities to claim goal attainment (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981, 1982). All of these activities qualify as identity symbols, as they can be used to indicate the possession of an identity to oneself as well as to others (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985). For example, an environmentalist might symbolize her identity by making congruent consumption choices (e.g., only buying locally-sourced products), by flaunting material symbols embodying her identity (e.g., carrying a reusable shopping bag), by pursuing certain affiliations (e.g., membership in an organization committed to saving the planet), and by persuading others (e.g., rallying to promote awareness of environmental issues).

SCT posits that experiencing the lack of a certain symbol creates a state of incompleteness, whereas acquiring identity symbols creates a sense of identity-goal completeness (e.g., Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982). Specifically, upon experiencing a setback in the pursuit of a cherished identity (e.g., by receiving unfavorable feedback), incomplete individuals are postulated to step up their goal striving by trying to attain alternative symbols aimed at reassuring that one possesses the indicators of the aspired-to identity (such compensation is referred to as *self-symbolizing*; Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985). In contrast, upon acquisition of an identity symbol (e.g., favorable feedback on an identity-relevant dimension), complete individuals should temper their identity-goal strivings. For example, an environmentalist who is made aware of some not-so-green choices (e.g., because her shopping habits are less environmentally conscious compared to other consumers) might more strongly strive for goal attainment in an attempt to resolve the experienced incompleteness (e.g., she might try harder to recycle). Conversely, on attaining a symbol of her aspired-to identity goal (e.g., favorable feedback on the greenness of her shopping habits), an environmentalist might reduce her identity-goal strivings because of the achieved state of completeness.

### Study 1: Green choices and behavior

We designed Study 1 to measure the extent to which environment-conscious individuals adopt green behaviors after the greenness of their purchases was either questioned or affirmed. We experimentally manipulated participants' state of goal completeness by providing them with positive, negative or no feedback on the greenness of their

shopping choices, and then measured whether they engaged in pro-environmental behaviors (i.e., recycling).

### Method

#### Green commitment

For course credit, we recruited 64 undergraduates (60 females) on the basis of their commitment to being green. At the beginning of the semester, we had measured participants' green commitment by including in a battery of tests 13-items capturing attitudes (e.g., *I am a person who endorses a green lifestyle*; 1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*), perceived effectiveness (e.g., *I feel I have enough knowledge to make well-informed decisions on environmental issues*; 1 = *totally disagree*, 7 = *totally agree*), relevant behaviors in the recent past (e.g., *How frequently, in the past two weeks, have you recycled and kept your garbage in separate piles of paper, plastic, glass*; 1 = *never*, 7 = *everyday*), and intentions to behave green in the near future (e.g., *How frequently, in the next two months, do you intend to avoid plastic bags and carry reusable shopping bags*; 1 = *never*, 7 = *everyday*). Consistent with previous research on SCT (e.g., Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009), responses were averaged to form a green commitment scale (Alpha = .80). Only committed participants (mean score > 3.5 on the averaged scales) were invited to participate in our three studies; 87.2% of participants in our subject pool were above this midpoint.

#### Feedback manipulation

Study 1 consisted of two ostensibly unrelated parts. In the first part, we informed participants that we were studying the shopping habits of college students in New York City, and asked them to do their typical grocery shopping in an online supermarket developed specifically for this experiment. Participants were free to shop across several product categories (produce, meats, dairy, and groceries) with no time restriction. To manipulate beliefs about participants' standing vis-à-vis their identity goal, upon completion of their shopping experience participants received fictitious feedback on how green their shopping was. The feedback consisted of scores, plotted on answer scales ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very* (12), on eight dimensions related to the environment (health, quality, heritage, family farming, PETA, local, footprint, and sustainability), and of an average ("Greendex") of the individual scores. To ensure plausibility of the cover story, the instructions provided a definition of what each green dimension was, as well as how each dimension was computed. All scores were plotted along with the scores of a bogus average college student. The bogus average student's mean score was said to be 6.25 of 12 possible points; it anchored the participants' mean score (see below), suggesting that students similar in age, lifestyle, and disposable income made greener (or less green) choices. The feedback was unrelated to the actual choices and randomly assigned by the computer.

This procedure allowed us to establish three bogus feedback conditions: in the negative feedback condition participants' scores were, on most dimensions, lower than the bogus student's, with the total Greendex equal to 3.88 (i.e., 2.38 points below the bogus student's;  $n = 21$ ), in the positive feedback condition participants' scores were, on most dimensions, higher than the bogus student's, with the total Greendex equal to 8.63 (i.e., 2.38 points above the bogus student's;  $n = 22$ ), and in the control condition participants received no feedback on their shopping behavior ( $n = 21$ ). To ensure that participants processed their standing vis-à-vis the bogus student, we asked them to compute the difference score on each dimension, and then sum all the differences. Finally, we asked participants to rate the extent to which they felt a certain way at the present moment (scales ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*). We used twenty adjectives, ten of them were positive (e.g., *active, excited, proud*) and ten of them were negative (e.g., *upset, distressed, guilty*), with the order of positive and negative items counterbalanced across conditions (Watson, Clark,

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