



The power of persuasive communication to influence sustainable holiday choices: Appealing to self-benefits and norms



Gerben Hardeman^a, Xavier Font^{b,*}, Jeroen Nawijn^c

^a ANVR, The Netherlands

^b University of Surrey, United Kingdom

^c NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands

HIGHLIGHTS

- Appealing messages are preferable to factual messages.
- Self-benefit messages are preferable to other (non-self) benefit messages.
- Benefit and descriptive appeals are preferable to injunctive appeals.
- These are irrespective of activating individual or collective levels of the self.
- ANVR have reoriented their sustainability programme in accordance.

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ABSTRACT

Messages with a clear focus on personal benefits and social and personal norms could impact holiday-makers' preferences towards opting for sustainability actions. This argument was explored using a three stage, sequential, mixed methods study. Firstly, analysis of current sustainability messages from three responsible tour operators revealed a low likelihood of them influencing customer preferences towards sustainability actions. An online survey of consumer beliefs and values proved that a manipulated message was more persuasive than the real messages used by the tour operators. This informed an experiment in message design that showed preferences for: i) obtaining individual gains from acting pro-sustainability (the importance of *self-benefit*), ii) doing what others are doing (the appeal of conforming to the *descriptive norm*), and iii) doing what others think one should do (the appeal of conforming to the *injunctive norm*). The findings have led the ANVR to relaunch their sustainability programme, focusing on customer benefits.

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1. Introduction

Despite the existence of numerous studies that assess the market demand for sustainable tourism, little research has been undertaken to understand the effectiveness of current communication efforts to change that demand. Recognising that it is difficult to encourage consumers to behave in a sustainable manner (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, & Raghunathan, 2010), marketers have called for additional research on the predictors of sustainable, pro-social consumer behaviours (Mick, 2006). We know that tourism businesses that integrate sustainable practices tend to encounter

challenges in effectively communicating their commitment to sustainability and the resultant customer benefits (Font, Elgammal, & Lamond, 2016; Villarino & Font, 2015), but with some exceptions (Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Wehrli et al., 2014), we have limited evidence to support these businesses to communicate their sustainability actions in a more persuasive way.

Our research aims to identify in what way messages influence pro-sustainability behaviour by investigating how messages are received by consumers in terms of both their appeal and perceived benefits, and the role that contextual factors play in the process. We discuss the literature on sustainable tourist behavioural processes in relation to the persuasiveness of communication messages, to inform a three stage sequential mixed methods study (Molina-Azorín & Font, 2016). In study 1, we analyse the website content of three Dutch tour operators recognised for their sustainability

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: x.font@surrey.ac.uk (X. Font).

practices and categorise their sustainability communications using theoretical notions of behaviour prediction. In study 2, we identify beliefs, values, and attitudes pertaining to sustainability and then use these to test three actual messages about sustainability on the websites of three tour operators against a fourth message that was manipulated based on theory and the outcomes of study 1. Finally, based on the outcomes of the previous steps, we explore what type of communication would be most effective to influence a customer's preference for the tourism products of sustainably responsible tour operators (study 3). We conclude reflecting on the theoretical and industry implications of the research.

2. Literature review

Research has shown that consumer decision making regarding intangible products such as tour packages is highly complex (Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). Tourism services are evaluated at the point of extrinsic cues (marketing brand, recommendations) because intrinsic cues (the product itself) cannot be tested by the consumer (Zeithaml, 1988). The purchase of tourism services occurs in stages and the consumer is influenced by both functional and emotional elements. This complexity in tourist decision making has long been recognised and many conceptual models have been developed to describe and analyse the different steps taken when making decisions (McCabe, Li, & Chen, 2016). Marketeers use these models to develop communication methods to persuade customers to purchase their products. However, an optimum model has yet to be defined since tourist behaviour is influenced by many different social, psychological and contextual factors, and is often irrational (McCabe et al., 2016).

Persuasion is defined as “human communication designed to influence others by modifying beliefs, values or attitudes” (O’Keefe, 2002, p. 2). Numerous studies have tested messages to identify different factors that influence persuasiveness. They have determined that the extent to which messages are appealing depends on multiple issues, for example: whether or not they are emotional, memorable, lively, able to capture the receiver’s attention, influence behaviour or create favorable thoughts, and whether or not they are associated with a brand/product that creates competitor advantage (Betthinghaus & Cody, 1994). We also know that the ability of consumers to experience the outcomes of their sustainability actions, to learn about them and to recount them to others increases persuasion when it activates their salient beliefs (Falk, 2005; Kachel & Jennings, 2010). Targeting salient, differentiating beliefs via communication interventions has been proven to succeed in, amongst others, increasing ethical behaviour towards paying visitor fees (Steckenreuter & Wolf, 2013), picking up litter (T. J. Brown, Ham, & Hughes, 2010), and hotel towel reuse (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). In addition to focusing on consumers’ salient beliefs, the message appeal should fit with the product type (Shavitt, 1992) i.e. emotional appeals should be applied for emotional products and more rational appeals, that contain facts and statistics, should be used for utilitarian products (Wehrli et al., 2014). Inevitably, salient beliefs will differ between behaviours and target audiences (Fishbein & Manfredo, 1992) therefore any evaluation of them must be thorough, objective and should take account of any unique contextual factors rather than adopting an intuitive, generalist approach. Consequently, the context itself needs to be reported along with the specific procedures used to discover the target beliefs (Downs & Hausenblas, 2005).

From the range of possible, alternative ways to increase persuasion we shall focus on two routes, namely matching a customer’s appeal for a product with their expected benefits and norms (O’Keefe, 2002; White & Simpson, 2013). Firstly, the benefit

appeal explains who will gain from the sustainability action: the consumer, the society or the company. Many of the sustainable tourism industry’s messages about behaviour change are communicated to consumers in a way that does not improve the customer experience and asserts sustainability facts without a clear target beneficiary (Gössling & Buckley, 2016; G.; Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010); the immediate incentives for consumers to change their behaviour are often weak or non-existent (Osterhus, 1997). This is despite evidence that assertiveness is counterproductive when it is seen as an infringement of the consumers freedom of choice (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Kronrod, Grinstein, & Wathieu, 2012), particularly when promoting responsible behaviour (Meneses & Palacio, 2007). We consider the use of self-benefit appeals to communicate some form of benefit to the consumer as a result of engaging in pro-sustainability actions (White & Simpson, 2013).

Secondly, much research has been done to investigate the effects on behaviour of messages containing normative appeals (e.g. Schultz, Nolan, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2007). Social identity could be subdivided into two parts: personal identity, linked to a person’s independent self; or social identity, linked to the various identities of groups to which a person belongs or relates to (Tajfel, 2010). Personally and socially accepted norms facilitate behaviours that conform to these espoused identities and therefore, are easy to analyse as part of models of behaviour prediction (Bamberg & Schmidt, 2003). Personal norms refer to an individual’s belief about their moral obligation to engage in a specific behaviour (de Groot, Abrahamse & Jones, 2013). In workplaces where organisational values to not promote sustainable behaviour, it is the personal norms and values of some individuals that determine which actions are taken (El Dief & Font, 2011). Studies have shown that the stronger one’s personal norm to act pro-environmentally, the more one is inclined to make more sustainable choices and to act accordingly.

Social norms “guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of laws” (Sherif, 1936, p. 152) and have been used as injunctive appeals (highlighting what others think one should do) and descriptive appeals (highlighting what others are doing) to encourage consumers to behave more sustainably. Appeals that employed descriptive norms (for example, ‘the majority of guests reuse their towels’) proved superior to an appeal widely used by hotels that focused solely on environmental protection (Goldstein et al., 2008). Normative appeals were most effective when describing group behaviour that occurred in the setting that most closely matched the individual’s immediate situational circumstances (‘the majority of guests in this room reuse their towels’). People seem to be quite flexible and dynamic in determining whether they rely on the individual or collective level of the self to make their decisions, and the literature suggests that the context influences whether or not the individual (independent) or the collective (interdependent) self is activated (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999).

Combining both benefit and normative elements of our framework elicits further avenues for research. Self-benefit appeals could be a moderator of the effectiveness of the appeals using social norms (White & Pelozo, 2009). Yet, despite promoting choices that show the benefits for society or the environment, consumers are often resistant to activities that involve cost to the individual self (e.g. extra time, change of behaviour, additional efforts) (Diekmann & Preisendörfer, 2003). Instead, the collective level of the self (i.e. reflecting the benefits of the sustainability action to society) could be activated. Whether individuals take self-serving sustainability actions or others-serving seems conditioned by whether they belong to an individualistic or collectivistic culture and to their position of power within their multiple cultural identities (Font,

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