A Room With a Viewpoint: Using Normative Appeals to Motivate Energy Conservation in a Hotel Setting

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In addition to investigating the power of social norms to encourage pro-environmental behavior in a hotel setting, the current research also seeks to examine the extent to which a variety of consumer identities might differentially motivate adherence to the implicit social roles or explicit descriptive norms associated with such identities. Contrary to much previous research, but consistent with predictions, an appeal conveying the descriptive norm of that particular room’s previous occupants yielded higher compliance rates than the other three descriptive norm appeals, even though individuals consider this group to be comparatively much less meaningful to their personal identities than the other groups.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recently, many consumer researchers have noted that very little research has been conducted on the factors that influence consumers’ prosocial behaviors, and even less on pro-environmental behaviors. This paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature while also making theoretical contributions to consumer behavior by examining the extent to which a variety of different types of consumer identities might differentially motivate adherence to the implicit social roles or explicit descriptive norms associated with such identities. In these studies, we manipulated the message hotel guests see in signs in their rooms asking them to participate in the hotel’s environmental conservation program by reusing their towels.

We conducted study 1 with two major purposes in mind. The first was to test the effectiveness of one of the more commonly used towel reuse messages—a cause-related marketing message that promised a donation to an environmental protection organization on the condition that guests chose to participate in the program—versus a similar message that better utilized the norm of reciprocity by informing the guests that the hotel had already donated to such an organization on their behalf. We suggested that rather than making a beneficial action contingent on the guests’ behavior, a more psychologically effective strategy utilizing the norm of reciprocity would be to have the hotel provide the beneficial action first on behalf of its guests and then ask the guests to return the favor by participating in the towel reuse program. This hypothesis was supported by the finding that the reciprocation message yielded higher towel reuse rates than the cooperation-based cause-related marketing message. In addition to demonstrating the sequence of actions that most effectively utilizes the norm of reciprocity, these findings add to the research literature on when incentives fail to motivate the intended target behavior.

The second purpose of study 1 was to attempt to disentangle a potential confound in previous research investigating social identity and norm adherence. Specifically, when researchers have found that individuals adhere to the norms of important reference groups that are relevant to their self-concept, there are two potential mechanisms for this effect. On the one hand, learning the descriptive norms of an important social group could activate the social identity associated with that group and cause individuals to follow the explicit descriptive norm of that group. Yet, it is also possible that simply activating a given important social identity inclines individuals to behave in line with the social roles that are commonly and implicitly associated with such a social category. We hypothesized and found that the messages that activated either of the two important social identities but that contained no explicit descriptive normative information would motivate towel reuse to a lesser extent that would a message conveying an explicit descriptive norm of an unimportant (but situationally relevant) social identity. The results of study 1 suggested that in order to optimize social identity effects, it is necessary to ensure that an important social identity is not only salient but that the norms associated with the identity are known and also salient. In addition, study 1 revealed that descriptive normative information, even if not associated with an important social identity but rather is associated with those who have been in the same situation as the target individual, is a powerful social influence on that individual’s behavior.

The primary purpose of study 2 was to investigate the extent to which the descriptive norms of different types of reference groups might differentially encourage guests to participate in the towel recycling program. We argue that, although the meaningfulness of a given reference group identity is certainly an important factor in determining the degree to which a consumer will follow that group’s norms, both the perceived uniqueness and the perceived diagnosticity of that reference group identity are other important factors. Consistent with predictions, but contrary to previous conceptualizations, we found that the appeal conveying the descriptive norm of that particular room’s previous occupants yielded a higher compliance rate than the other three descriptive norm appeals, even though individuals considered this group to be comparatively much less meaningful to their personal identities than the other groups. Finally, all of the descriptive norm appeals as a group did better than the traditional environmental appeal, which makes salient guests’ identities as environmentalists but does not communicate an explicit descriptive norm. Both theoretical and pragmatic implications are discussed.

REFERENCES
