Choice architecture engages moral and not social norms to influence pro-environmental consumer choice through negative and positive emotions

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Abstract

Helping consumers to make better and repeated decisions about food, clothes, shelter, health care, and other life domains, is a driving sentiment in consumer research, and embodied in the transformative consumer research (TCR) agenda (Mick 2006). However, there is a recurring phenomenon: Consumer may start well, but in time falter and often abandon behaviors they still believe to be best. They seem baffled by the disconnect between their intentions and actual behaviors (Sheeran, 2002), and when satisfactory answers do not emerge, many start questioning if staying on the virtuous path is worth it. Shedding light on factors that may cause consumers to not follow through and identifying interventions that might help bridge that gap is our concern.

We approach this conundrum by accepting that many consumers have admirable intentions on which they fail to act, but instead of investigating internal factors such as motivation or commitment, we focus on external influences that nudge consumers in different paths. More specifically, we investigate differences in the consumer behaviors and associated emotions elicited when either social or moral norms are made salient by choice architecture. Given that sustaining patterns of responsible consumption is difficult (e.g., Steg & Nordlund, 2012) in spite of their personal, social and environmental benefits, we use this consumption space to test whether making social or moral norms salient can lead to a more virtuous path.

We propose to make norms salient by altering choice architecture (deliberate variations in how choices are presented to consumers), known to unconsciously influence behavior in socially desirable ways (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). This research ascertains that making moral norms

salient leads to choices that differ from those elicited by social norms. In four experiments we manipulate norm types, and how they are made salient using choice architecture, to influence consumer product choices.

One mechanism by which norms influence behavior is the activation of norm-related emotions. (Elster, 1989). Specifically, transgressions of social norms have been associated with shame, which is evoked when the transgression is observed or evaluated by others (Tangney, 1995; Dubreuil, & Grégoire, 2013). In contrast, violations of moral norms are associated with guilt focused on the wrongness of the violation. Finally, compliance with a moral norm has been

associated with pride (Tangney, Stuewig & Mashek, 2007). We expect the activation of moral norms to elicit guilt and pride, and social norms to elicit shame. These emotions also affect sustainable consumption behavior, including but not limited to guilt (Kaiser, 2006), pride (Onwezen et al., 2014; Tracy & Robins, 2007), and shame (Rees, Klug & Bamberg, 2015;Tagney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Onwezen et al., 2013).

Using experiments, we explore if choice architecture may be directed to activate social norms in some cases and moral norms in other cases, and the effect of these two norms on consumer behaviors through associated emotions. In Study 1A and Study 1B, norms are directly made salient by changing decision information. Study 2 makes moral norms salient indirectly by manipulating the consumer's choice set, and Study 3 activates social norms indirectly by manipulating post-choice social consequences and social exposure. Moderation models are used to explore the interaction of choice architecture manipulations with guilt, pride and shame. The target behavior was purchasing a recycled paper notebook, captured through direct purchases or willingness to pay commitments.

We find that choice architecture activates moral but not social norms, and that associated positive and negative emotions (guilt, shame, regret and pride) exert influence on choices but not on willingness to pay. Our findings show that it is possible to nudge consumers to choose pro-environmental products by making moral norms salient without attempting to change people's values, but not by making social norms salient. This finding goes against the idea that making social norms salient may be more effective in changing behavior, including pro- environmental preferences. Our work explicitly controlled for personal dispositions towards pro- environmental values and attention to social comparison. Two types of choice architecture techniques were tested: Product information and product assortment but others may also be effective. Interestingly, despite eliciting similarly intense self-reported emotions, these only affected choice tasks and such effects were moderated by choice architecture. Study 2 results further suggest that when indirect choice architecture interventions are attempted, such as through composition of the product set, care must be taken to not elicit consumer reactance. The results in Study 2 were striking in how an over-constrained consideration set can lead consumers to choose the product type that has been disadvantaged by the consideration set composition. Consumers want to be environmentally responsible, but they want to retain control of when and how they fulfill that responsibility.

Our results highlight the transformative potential of helping consumers making correct decisions for their own well-being, and the planet and society at large, by designing choice environments that make moral norms salient, directly or indirectly. We use the idea of choice architecture shaping the actions of private agents to promote well-being and socially desirable choices. With this research, we open a pathway for producers of responsible and healthy products as well as policy makers engaged in social marketing to increase smart decision making without far reaching campaigns that pretend to affect people's dispositions. Moreover, finding that the

appeal to moral norms is more effective than appealing to social norms implies that interventions may not depend on complex social mechanism that are influenced by culture and trends.