

# When values correct previous purchase decisions: The influence of felt discomfort on later purchases

Martijn Keizer, Linda Steg, & Martijn van Zomeren

*University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands*

As the number of environmentally friendly products grows, consumers face more and more choices between pro-environmental products and regular (often cheaper) alternatives. Because consumers are likely to make several of these decisions during a supermarket visit, it is of great practical importance to examine how a decision on whether or not to choose an environmentally friendly product may influence subsequent similar choices. Theoretically, we pursue the novel idea that felt discomfort plays a key role in this process by correcting previous choices that do not match individuals' values.

Indeed, some consumers are more concerned with environmental issues than others. For individuals who care strongly about the environment, we expect that choosing a regular rather than an environmentally friendly product leads to a sense of discomfort, as this choice is dissonant from their core beliefs. We expect this negative feeling to motivate a pro-environmental subsequent choice. By contrast, individuals who are less concerned about the environment should not experience such discomfort (because their choice cannot be dissonant from their values), and hence should not lead to choice correction.

We tested these predictions in a paradigm in which participants made two forced-choice decisions between a pro-environmental supermarket product and its regular alternative in an online shopping environment. After making the first choice, participants completed a short questionnaire on the environmental consequences of their

choice. The aim of these questions was to make participants aware of the normative aspects of their decision regarding the environment. Participants then completed a measure of felt discomfort, followed by the second forced-choice decision. A measure of participants' environmental values was completed by the participants at least one week prior to participating in the experiment.

Results supported strong support for our hypotheses. Participants with stronger environmental values reported significantly more discomfort after choosing the regular product than participants with weaker environmental values. They also showed clear compensation behaviour: When making the second choice, participants with stronger environmental values picked the environmentally friendly option significantly more often than when making the first. Participants with weaker environmental values did not correct their choice behavior.

Our results suggest that the influence of a choice between an environmentally friendly product and a regular alternative on a subsequent similar choice depends on whether individuals are reminded of their values. This reminder leads to felt discomfort that results in a compensatory subsequent choice. This process has profound implications for theory and practice. Theoretically, our findings offer an important pointer to the role of values in modern consumer behaviour. Practically, our results suggest that reminders of relevant values in the supermarket may be used to help those who share these values to act upon them.