

Reducing overconsumption using the social norm



Abstract

Overconsumption plays a big part in the current environmental crisis, making a shift towards sufficient consumption imperative. Since overconsumption is often a habit, triggering a stop and re-think process in the consumers' minds may be the way for reduction. Societal norms, proven effective for behaviour change, could disrupt consumption habits by combining a static (present norm) and dynamic (how the norm is changing) norm. This thesis explores the impact of combining sustainable and unsustainable framings of static and dynamic norms on consumer behaviour. A laboratory study exposed participants to four norm combinations before engaging in a shopping task. No significant differences emerged in the number of items selected or the time spent shopping across groups. However, a marginally significant interaction effect hinted at the potential influence of combined static and dynamic norms: participants selected the most items with two matching sustainable norms and the least with matching unsustainable norms. Notably, upon removing older participants from the data, this interaction effect disappeared and the effect of the dynamic norm became significant. Unsustainable norms triggered significantly higher negative emotions than sustainable ones, while sustainable norms elicited significantly higher positive emotions. Yet, neither significantly mediated the relationship between static and dynamic norms and item selection. These findings are relevant for marketeers and (communication) designers of companies seeking to engage in demarketing or government agencies promoting sufficient consumption. These results can lay the foundation for more extensive research into this combination of static and dynamic norms, which could be used to make stronger messages to promote both sufficient consumption and other sustainable behaviour.

Goal

As the climate crisis is becoming more dire, the need for sustainable consumer behaviour grows. Overconsumption plays a big role in the deterioration of the climate and it is therefore important that people start trying to limit their consumption and move towards sufficient consumption. Since overconsumption can be seen as a habit, a stop and re-think process might be needed to reduce it. This research tried to find out whether displaying a combination of a static and dynamic norm (where a static norm shows the present and provides the stop moment, and the dynamic norm shows how the norm is changing and can therefore provide the re-think) can be used to trigger this process and thus reduce consumption.

Experiment

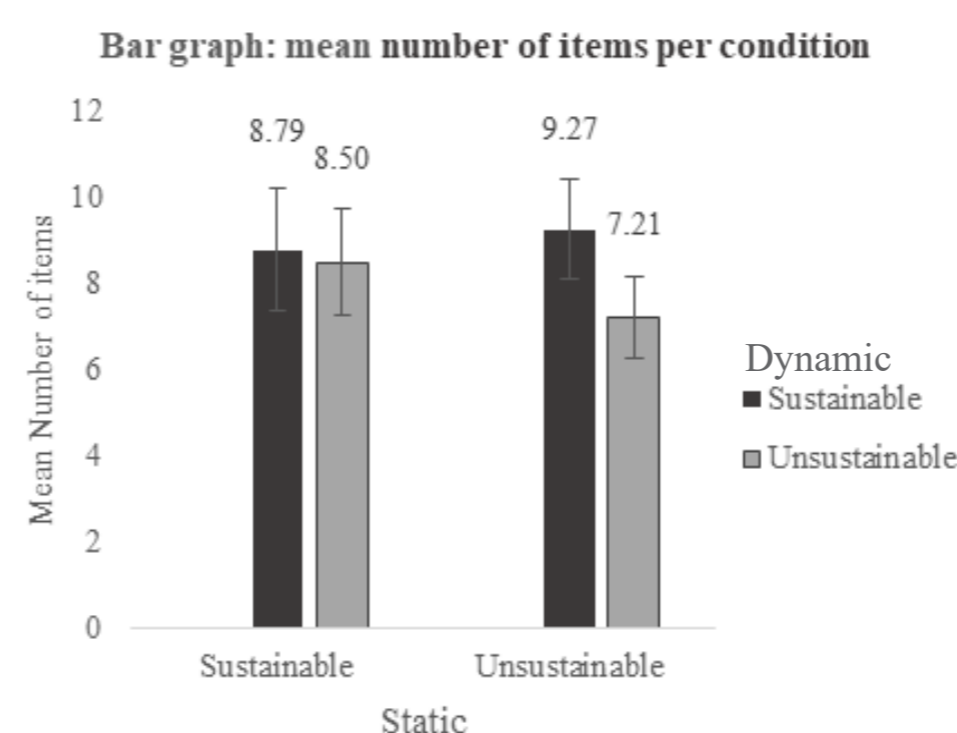
		Dynamic norm	
		Sustainable	Unsustainable
Static norm	Sustainable	1 (matching framing)	2 (mismatching framing)
	Unsustainable	3 (mismatching framing)	4 (matching framing)

The participants were invited to test a web shop in a questionnaire. They were randomly assigned to one condition in a 2 (static norm: unsustainable/sustainable) x 2 (dynamic norm: unsustainable/sustainable) between-subjects design. A final sample size of 271 participants (Mage = 22.86 years, SD = 5.69, 55.0% female, 1.1% other gender or prefer not to say) was used for data analysis.

They were first shown a video containing the manipulation, after which they were asked to shop as normal (without budget) in a simulated webshop (with 6 pages of clothes, each containing 9 items). After shopping, they were told they had some leftover budget and asked whether they wanted to donate this or use it to continue shopping. Following, were some questions about covariates and demographics. After both the video and the shopping section, the participants were asked to indicate what emotions they felt. An example of the two consecutive frames of a manipulation video (for, in this case, condition 3) is shown below.



Results and discussion



Most of the analyses did not provide significant results. However, there was a marginally significant interaction effect between the sustainable framing of the static and dynamic norm and the number of items selected. This implied that a matching combination of unsustainable norms (condition 4) was the most effective in reducing consumption (least number of items chosen). The means of the number of items chosen can be seen in the graph on the left. There was also a clear relation between the framing of the norms and the emotions the participants felt, where more unsustainable framing resulted in higher negative emotions and more sustainable framing resulted in higher positive emotions. All this together can, be seen as explorative, laying the groundwork for future research.

