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Let Us Give Thanks: How Gratitude and Message Framing Can Reduce Food Waste

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This research tests a theoretical model in which an emotional appeal (gratitude 'for having' vs. 'not having') is shown to increase consumers' awareness of food waste issues (consumer intentions, participation, and choice to receive information related to food waste issues.), depending on the associated congruent message framing (gain vs. loss).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose

For many developed and developing nations, food waste is a major social and political issue that has a range of environmental, social and economic implications. This has come about because of high levels of food waste, with estimates suggesting anywhere from thirty (FAO, 2011) to fifty percent (Stuart, 2009) of all food is sent to landfill. This has major economic and social implications. For example, recent estimates have placed the global value of annual food waste at \$1 trillion (Goldenberg, 2016). Along with these economic burdens, in countries like the United States, where more than one in ten people are considered 'food insecure' (U. S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service, 2016), there can also be widespread social implications. What, then, can be done to reduce food waste? Previous research (La Barbera, Del Giudice, & Sannino, 2014; Graham-Rowe, Jessop, & Sparks, 2014) has suggested education is the key. However, prior research has typically focused on either cognitive appeals or appeals focused on negative emotions such as guilt, disgust and anxiety. However, there is an existing body of literature suggesting positive (vs negative) emotions may have a greater influence on intended outcomes, such as love on prosocial behavior (Cavanaugh, Bettman, & Luce, 2015) and anticipating feelings of pride on self-regulation of vice foods (Patrick, Chun, & MacInnis, 2009).

As such, the current research develops a theoretical model in which an emotional appeal (gratitude) is used to increase consumers' awareness of food waste issues, depending on the associated congruent message framing (gain vs. loss). Drawing from past research on emotion and construal level theory, we predict that gratitude 'for having' versus gratitude 'for not having' should be associated with different construal levels. This is because when consumers construe something they have (vs not have), they think about objects or events differing on psychological distance (proximal vs. distal). Thus, when consumers feel grateful for something they possess, they are more likely to think of items or experiences they currently have.

Design/Methodology

This research consisted of a pilot study and three experiments. The pilot study verified our predictions that gratitude types can lead to different construal levels. Study 1 sought to test Hypothesis 1 by measuring participants' intentions to reduce food waste. Study 2 was a between subjects design, that tested Hypothesis 2 and established the underlying mechanism driving the emotion effects. It replicated the findings of Study 1 using a different dependent (behavioral) measure. Study 3 was conducted to increase confidence in the findings by using a different wording in the manipulation task, thereby ruling out alternative explanations. In addition, it examined a different behavioral measure.

Findings, originality and contribution

Findings from the three studies provide important theoretical implications. First, this research contributes to the literature on gratitude and consumer behavior by differentiating different types of

gratitude. In particular, this research extends the work of Lee and Gershoff (2013) which differentiates gratitude 'for having' something positive and gratitude 'for not having' something negative. Second, the findings from this research establish processing fluency as the mediating factor, which underlies the emotion effects. Notably, consumers have higher levels of processing fluency due to a congruent processing style arising from different types of gratitude and message framing. That is, gratitude 'for having' (vs. not having) activates low (vs. high) construal levels, which matches with loss (vs. gain) frames. As previous research typically examines how different, discrete emotions (e.g., guilt, shame, disgust) can differentially influence construal levels (Chowdhry et al., 2015; Han et al., 2014), these findings also contribute to the literature on construal level because we identify how the same emotion (gratitude) can lead to differential construal levels depending on its focus (i.e., having vs. not having). Third, this research contributes to the literature on message framing by identifying the moderating role of emotions on the effectiveness of gain and loss frames. However, the current research extends the importance of message framing in encouraging pro-environmental behaviors such as food waste reduction.

This research focused on framing effects of the promotional aspect of a social marketing campaign. Social marketers in government agencies, not-for-profits and organizations need to pay attention to how they frame food waste behavior and the relatively 'new' message about the need for reduction. Only recently has the impact of food waste entered mainstream media and public awareness. While many individuals are still unaware or unconcerned about food waste (Quested et al., 2013; Quested et al., 2011), messages that enter the public eye must be persuasive enough to motivate behavior change. Because of this, downstream social marketing campaigns (Carins & Rundle-Thiele, 2014) that disseminate information and educate communities about food waste will continue to be incredibly relevant into the future.

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