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MAKING THE RIGHT DECISION: SUBJECTIVE EVALUATION OF PRO-ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Abstract. *The aim of the present study was to investigate the perceptions of differently worded and illustrated public service announcements (PSAs). The results of the first experiment revealed that participants were inclined to show the most preference for those PSAs that highlighted the extent of the problem if the appeals were not accompanied by an image; if the appeals were accompanied by an image, participants preferred the appeals that directly requested the change of behavior. Results of the second experiment revealed that when leaflets had no images, people preferred the appeal that highlighted the problem, however when an image was next to the appeal, people preferred the request-based appeal.*

Keywords*: water conservation, social norms, PSA, subjective evaluation, pro-environmental behavior*

Raktažodžiai: *vandens taupymas, socialinės normos, socialinė reklama, subjektyvus vertinimas, aplinkai palankus elgesys*

Introduction

Promoting sustainable practices remains an important task not only at the organizational but also the societal level. Promoting sustainability is becoming increasingly a necessary part of the work done by municipalities and local governments. It must be stressed, however, that there is a need for evidence based societal interventions that can effectively promote sustainability and balance the cost of the initiative to the benefit it provides. Too many government-sponsored or private pro-environmental

initiatives lack a solid evidence basis to support their effectiveness and this may lead to wasted resources and, consequently, is not at all sustainable. The present study uses water conservation as an example as it is one of the most accessible pro-environmental behaviors a person can perform, and most people have the opportunity to use water responsibly on a daily basis.

When creating public service announcements (PSAs), one does not promote a brand, an item, or a service; one promotes behavior. This requires a qualitative shift from the common advertising practices, as they might not be as effective in eliciting actual behavioral change. If one wants to promote a brand, it is enough to present the brand's name against a contrasting background (Mikhailitchenko et al. 2009) and that will positively affect the brand's recognition. However, how does one consistently elicit behavioral change? Furthermore, how does one elicit uncomfortable, unpleasant, or even costly behaviors?

In the present study, we adopt an evolutionary framework of eliciting and explaining behavior (Poškus 2018). There is an extensive literature on how PSAs, targeted at sustainability and at pro-social behaviors in general, could be created (Griskevicius, Cialdini, and Goldstein 2008; Bator and Cialdini 2000; Cialdini 2003). A recent meta-analysis suggests that normative appeals as well as normative influence in general is an extremely effective means of eliciting behavioral change (Poškus 2016). Generally, when constructing a normative PSA, the most effective appeals are those that describe a positive descriptive norm of a desired behavior (i. e. that the desired behavior is prevalent and common) and an injunction appeal that describes that behavior as socially acceptable, i. e. that the society expects you to follow the rules and to perform that behavior (Poškus 2016, 2017). It must be stressed that normative appeals have been found to be consistently more effective in promoting specific behavior than appeals requesting the change of behavior or the appeals which inform about a prevalent negative situation that must be changed (Poškus 2016).

The effectiveness of normative appeals can be best explained in terms of evolutionary psychology. Normative appeals inform the observer about the prevalence and, therefore, the adaptiveness of certain behaviors and reduce the cognitive load when making behavioral decisions (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini 2000). It is adaptive to follow the behavior of the majority, as it indicates low-risk behaviors with consistent rewards, hence the evolved tendency to do so. We tend to comply with descriptive societal norms because that is generally the most efficient tactic available (Griskevicius, Cantú, and Vugt 2012; Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini 2000; Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Sundie et al. 2012).

Compliance with injunctive social norms, which reflect how a person ought to behave, generally stems from the fear of perceived punishment if one is caught disobeying the norm. Thus, injunctive norms possess a cognitive element and are based not only on observation, but on internalized beliefs and societal pressures as well (Poškus 2016). However, if a person is presented with conflicting descriptive and injunctive social norms, the descriptive norms are generally more powerful in eliciting

behavior (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990; Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini 2000) in part because the lack of punishment for disobeying a norm becomes apparent. Thus, the mostly unconscious "calculation" of the adaptiveness of a given behavior is what drives it.

Subjective appraisal of a PSA might not always be congruent with its actual effectiveness. As a matter of fact, there is strong evidence to the contrary – people tend to underestimate and under-detect normative influence (Nolan et al. 2008; Jaeger and Schultz 2017)even though respondents rated such norms as least important in their conservation decisions. Study 2, a field experiment, showed that normative social influence produced the greatest change in behavior compared to information highlighting other reasons to conserve, even though respondents rated the normative information as least motivating. Results show that normative messages can be a powerful lever of persuasion but that their influence is underdetec ted.","author":[{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Nolan","given":"Jessica M","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Schultz","given":"P Wesley","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Cialdini","given":"Robert B","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Goldstein","given":"Noah J","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Griskevicius","given":"Vladas","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""}],"container-title":"Personality and social psychology bulletin","id":"ITEM-1","issued":{"date-parts":[["2008"]]},"page":"913-923","title":"Normative social influence is underdetected.","type":"article-journal","volume":"34"},"uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=79ad2495-53c1-471a-911a-1f479b4bf648"]},{"id":"ITEM-2","itemData":{"DOI":"10.1016/j.jenvp.2017.03.015","ISSN":"15229610","abstract":"Normative information has shown success in promoting proenvironmental behavior. Research suggests that its influence is largely underdetected, with recipients widely underestimating its impact. Consequently, behavioral changes induced by normative information should be perceived as intrinsically motivated. This hypothesis was tested with a commitment-making procedure, where intrinsically motivated commitments tend to produce relatively long-term behavioral changes and extrinsically motivated commitments tend to produce relatively short-term changes. In a field experiment, 8876 households under drought restrictions were randomly assigned to receive restriction information, a strong warning, or normative information communicating community compliance to restrictions. Subsets of households in the latter two conditions were asked to commit to adhering to water restrictions. Immediate reductions were evidenced for committers that received either a strong warning or normative information, but only committers that received normative information showed longer-term reductions in water use. These findings support the claim that normative influence's underdetected nature promotes intrinsic motivation.","author":[{"dropping-particle":"","family":"Jaeger","given":"Christine M.","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""},{"dropping-particle":"

","family":"Schultz","given":"P. Wesley","non-dropping-particle":"","parse-names":false,"suffix":""}],"container-title":"Journal of Environmental Psychology","id":"ITEM-2","issued":{"date-parts":[["2017"]]},"page":"199-208","publisher":"Elsevier Ltd","title":"Coupling social norms and commitments: Testing the underdetected nature of social influence","type":"article-journal","volume":"51"},"uris":["http://www.mendeley.com/documents/?uuid=08ce5f1b-0b0e-40ab-8cbe-e6e4bec7f3d4"]}],"mendeley":{"formattedCitation":"(Nolan et al. 2008; Jaeger and Schultz 2017 which, consequently, leads to its underemployment (Griskevicius, Cialdini, and Goldstein 2008) in promoting pro-social behavior. It must be noted that many static visual PSAs (e.g. posters) are created by ad agencies (that are used to commercial advertising strategies) or non-governmental organizations (that employ volunteers and amateurs to do the task). This leads to the PSAs being designed based on the designer's "gut feeling" of what should be written and depicted in the PSA and on the subjective emotional "weight" of the PSA. The aforementioned strategies, while mostly effective in commercial advertising, completely miss the point of the function of a PSA, which is to elicit specific behaviors consistently and effectively.

Moreover, designers of PSAs often concentrate on emotional appeals, either positive or negative. While they do influence a PSA's effectiveness, the problem is that change of emotion not necessarily leads to the change of behavior. To make matters worse, PSAs tend to emphasize negative emotions, such as fear or disgust. This can lead to avoiding the presented information instead of engaging in the targeted behavior. The advantage of normative appeals is that they can influence behavior itself and this makes adoption of these appeals in creating PSAs even more important.

Thus, the present study aims to investigate various subjective evaluations of static visual pro-environmental PSAs (presented as leaflets) in an attempt to identify what makes PSAs likable and what may be the reasons that lead practitioners to design PSAs that are ineffective and sometimes even potentially harmful to the cause they are trying to promote. In the present study we examine subjective appraisals of differently worded and differently illustrated PSAs that urge the observer to conserve water and what types of PSAs individuals would choose if they had to promote water conservation.

1. Study 1: Subjective evaluation of PSAs

Knowing that people tend to underestimate normative influence (Nolan et al. 2008) and tend to assign more subjective importance to negative rather than positive stimuli (Pinker 2011), it was hypothesized that the most subjectively effective would be the negative appeal (that highlights the extent of the problem) or the traditional appeal (related to direct request to change the behavior), while normative appeals will not bet perceived as effective. It was also hypothesized that the addition of an accompanying image which has positive emotional valence would positively affect the subjective evaluation of normative and standard appeals (Crawford and Gregory 2015;

Lancendorfer, Atkin, and Reece 2008; Mikhailitchenko et al. 2009)within and across national contexts, researchers tend to treat humor as a culture-bound phenomenon, without offering universal theories or frameworks for exploring the use of humor-based ad appeals in cross-cultural advertising. This article undertakes a systematic review and synthesis of literature on humor in cross-cultural advertising to produce a research taxonomy (7Cs, while having no or even negative impact on the subjective evaluation of the negative appeal, because the image would be dissonant with the message.

1.1 Method

1.1.1. Stimuli

The experiment was a 2 by 3 design, where three types of pro-environmental messages were presented with or without an accompanying image. The six stimuli are presented in Figure 1. Two of the appeals were designed similarly to how most PSAs are designed (one appeals to a person's morals and requests to change a behavior, while another simply highlights a problem). The third type of stimuli was normative and designed based on the recommendations and findings of other authors (Bator and Cialdini 2000; Cialdini 2003; Griskevicius, Cantú, and Vugt 2012). The illustration of the *kawaii* (cute) faucet was adapted from previous research that used persuasive PSAs to promote pro-environmental behavior (Poškus 2017). A *kawaii* image was selected because it is associated with positive emotions, which are desirable when the goal is to promote specific behavior (as opposed to fear or disgust, which invokes avoidance behavior).

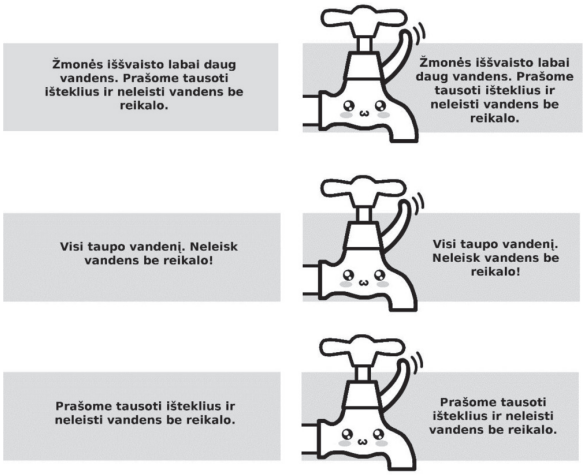


Figure 1. **The six stimuli used in the study.**

From top to bottom, the appeals read: "People waste a lot of water. Please conserve resources and don't let the water run unnecessarily."; "Everyone is conserving water. Don't let the water run unnecessarily!"; "We ask you to conserve resources and not let the water run unnecessarily."

1.1.2. Procedure

Trained research assistants who approached potential study participants in public places (squares and shopping centers) carried out the experiment. Research assistants greeted the potential participants and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Only 32 potential participants that were approached declined the invitation to participate in the study, therefore any systematic bias is very unlikely. Research assistants made sure that every study participant is at least 18 years of age or older, if a potential participant was younger than 18 years of age, the research assistants politely excused themselves and carried on.

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants were handed a leaflet showing one of six possible PSAs that are intended to encourage water conservation. The participants were asked to look at the PSA and give their opinion by filling in a short survey underneath it. Research assistants had the six possible leaflets prearranged in a repeating order so that taking one from the top of the pile and handing it out worked as a random participant assignation to an experimental condition.

1.1.3. Measures

Participants were asked to identify their age and gender. They also were asked to answer 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The items were as follows: "This public service announcement seemed interesting to me"; "This public service announcement seemed attractive to me"; "This public service announcement irritates me"; "This public service announcement made me think about my actions"; "This public service announcement made me change"; "This public service announcement convinced me"; "This public service announcement seemed fun to me"; "I like this public service announcement"; "The visuals of this public service announcement are fun"; "This public service announcement is visually appealing"; "I think this public service announcement is effective"; "I feel as if this public service announcement is nagging me." These items were taken from a pool of items tested in a prior pilot study and were identified by the participants of the pilot study as substantially different and representative of the various possible subjective appraisals of PSAs.

1.1.4. Participants

A total of 480 participants took part in the experiment, however some of them filled in the measures incorrectly or left some items unanswered, therefore the fi-

nal sample consists of 465 participants. The mean participant age was 34.34 years (SD = 13.33); 144 were male, 317 were female and 4 did not report their gender. Genders ($\chi^2(5) = 8.15$, $p = .148$), as well as participant age ($F(5, 455) = .61$, $p = .693$) were equally distributed among experimental conditions.

1.2. Results and discussion

A series of 2 by 3 factorial ANOVAs were run with the scores of each item of the questionnaire (Figure 2). Results showed, that in most cases, there was a significant main effect of image on the evaluation of the presented PSA. PSAs that had appeals accompanied with an image were generally more positively received. Such PSAs were evaluated as more interesting, more attractive, more encouraging to think of one's behavior (although not change it), more convincing, more fun, more likeable, more convincing, and more effective.

The effect of image, however, seems to have a diminished effect for the negative appeal, possibly because the appeal and the image produce an emotional dissonance (Mikhailitchenko et al. 2009). When an appeal is not accompanied with an image, research participants tend to favor the negatively worded appeal, thus providing more support that, on a subjective level, the more emotionally charged an appeal is – the more favorably it is received (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur 2011).

The effectiveness of a normative appeal lies in the fact that it does not highlight the reason for the advertised behavior, thus there is no apparent urgency or danger highlighted in the appeal. It does, however, highlight the descriptive norm of others behaving in a positive way, in this case – conserving water. The highlighting of a descriptive norm is accompanied with a call to engage in the behavior as well. From an emotional perspective, that might elicit feelings of not wanting to conform, as non-conformity is usually viewed as a positive trait. Normative appeals, however, unconsciously affect the individuals' perception of what behavior is adaptive and therefore elicit behavioral change (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990), even if the observers do not perceive that their behavior was affected (Nolan et al. 2008).

In the present study, we find that presenting an engaging and *kawaii* visual stimulus alongside an appeal substantially affects the subjective appraisal of the whole PSA and thus, the appeal in it. This effect, however, is ambiguous for the negative appeals. Without an accompanying image, negative appeals are subjectively perceived to be better than other appeals. Thus, the results shed light on why these appeals might be so prevalent in real-life situations, despite their possibly harmful effect.

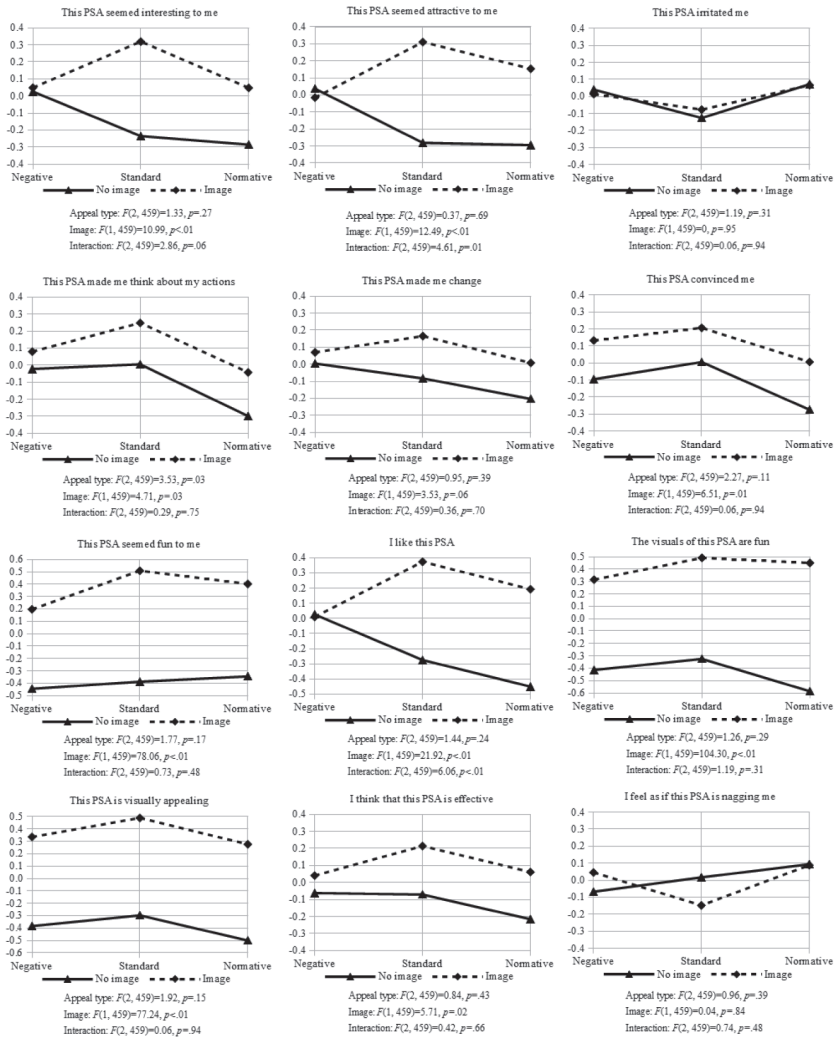


Figure 2. **ANOVA results for all questionnaire items.**

2. Study 2: Choosing a PSA

Study 1 evaluated PSAs' effects on the target viewer. However, during the PSA creation process the same PSA is also affecting creators and their decisions. In order

to understand the decisions that are being made in ad agencies, Study 2 aimed to identify, which PSAs are likely to be preferred by the creators. It was hypothesized that the selection of the PSAs for publishing will reflect subjectively perceived effects of PSAs – underestimating normative appeals, but at the same time taking the role of the accompanying image into account.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Stimuli

The same six variants of the PSA that were used as stimuli in the Study 1. However, they were presented as leaflets without an accompanying questionnaire.

2.1.2. Procedure

The experiment was carried out by trained research assistants who approached potential study participants in public places (squares and shopping centers). Research assistants greeted the potential participants and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the study. No participants that were approached declined the invitation to participate in the study. Research assistants made sure that every participant is at least 18 years of age or older, if a potential participant was younger than 18 years of age, the research assistants politely excused themselves and carried on.

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants were handed three leaflets with PSAs on them. Participants were told the following: "Pretend as if you are a government official who wants to promote water conservation. You have hired an ad agency to prepare a pro-environmental PSA. The agency has sent you these three possible ads. Which one would you choose to be used in the campaign?"

Prior to approaching them, participants were assigned to one of two conditions: one that would view PSAs presented without pictures, and one that would view PSAs with pictures. The research assistants alternated between conditions and were asked to approach an even number of participants to ensure both conditions are represented equally. This ensured random participant assignment to experimental conditions. Leaflets with the PSAs were shuffled after each participant to ensure that each participant viewed the leaflets in random order and any priming effects were balanced out.

2.1.3. Measures

Research assistants asked the participants to identify their age. Research assistants also recorded the choice the participants made and their gender.

2.1.4. Participants

One hundred and twenty people participated in the experiment, 59 were male and 61 were female, mean participant age was 32.40 (SD= 12.30). Genders ($\chi 2(1) = .3$, $p = .590$), as well as participant age ($t(118) = 1.57$, $p = .120$) were equally distributed among the two experimental conditions.

2.2. Results and discussion

The results of this experiment closely mirror the results of Study 1. Whether or not an appeal was accompanied by an image had a significant effect on which of the PSAs were most likely to be chosen by a participant ($\chi^2(2) = 9.34$, $p < .001$). Participants were most likely to choose the *negative* appeal when no image was accompanying the appeals, while the *standard* appeal was most likely to be chosen when the appeals were accompanied by an image (Figure 3).

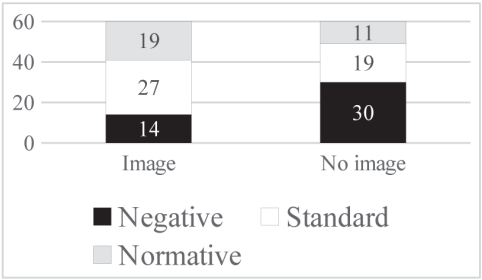


Figure 3. **Comparison of the effect of image on the choice of a PSA wording.**

It may be that people subjectively regard the effectiveness of a PSA in terms of how they are emotionally affected by it (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur 2011) and this leads to people deciding upon the most emotionally loaded wording when there are no other stimuli. When other emotionally loaded stimuli are presented, the wording becomes less influential because people most likely become aware of the image before reading the appeal and this primes positive emotions. Upon being primed with a positive image, people might not like appeals that are in dissonance with the emotional prime (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur 2011) and therefore the *negative* appeal is the least likely to be chosen when there is an accompanying positive image with it. Together with the first study this clearly demonstrates that PSA creators are likely to take into consideration the effect of images, but there is a tendency to neglect the value of normative appeals.

General discussion

This article sheds light on a few issues. First, the study demonstrated the significance of visual material that is used in PSAs. Second, it illustrates that the subjective perceptions of the PSA's effectiveness and likeability may be high even for ineffective PSAs. Third, the present study shows how malleable individuals' subjective perceptions are and how a simple introduction of an accompanying image can change how people perceive ads (Mikhailitchenko et al. 2009).

People tend to respond to ads emotionally and their immediate perceptions of the ads are primed by these emotions (Geuens, De Pelsmacker, and Faseur 2011). It is quite disappointing, but not at all surprising, that the overall best received type of the PSA, when no images were presented next to the appeals, was the *negative* one. The extent of the problem is explicitly demonstrated in the second experiment, where people had to choose which PSA to approve for a pro-environmental campaign and most people chose the *negative* appeal when there was no accompanying picture. The negative appeal, while eliciting a strong emotional response, highlights the prevalence of wasting water and thus, represents such behavior as a descriptive norm, which in turn leads to perception that the wasting behavior is adaptive and encouraged, even though the ad is aimed at promoting water conservation (Cialdini 2003). So on the surface this type of ad appears to be promoting pro-environmental behavior, but the evolutionary mechanisms that help us make behavioral decisions most likely would lead people to waste water even more (Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren 1990). This is problematic because it highlights that individuals tend not to understand what influences their behavior and in what way.

The addition of a positive and humorous image helped in reducing both how favorably the *negative* appeal was perceived and the rates at which it was chosen as the best alternative for a pro-environmental campaign. Thus, the addition of emotionally positive imagery (Crawford and Gregory 2015; Lancendorfer, Atkin, and Reece 2008) within and across national contexts, researchers tend to treat humor as a culture-bound phenomenon, without offering universal theories or frameworks for exploring the use of humor-based ad appeals in cross-cultural advertising. This article undertakes a systematic review and synthesis of literature on humor in cross-cultural advertising to produce a research taxonomy (7Cs might help in the overall perception of a PSA and might even increase the time spent examining and understanding it. Another explanation could be that dissonance between a negative appeal and a positive image has caused mixed emotions, which, in turn, had a negative effect on the attitudes towards the presented PSAs (Williams and Aaker 2000).

Conclusions

1. Ad agencies often create ads based on their artistic taste, rather than scientific evidence, hence the prevalence of the unfounded use of white space (Olsen, Pracejus, and O'Guinn 2012) and small type (Pillai, Katsikeas, and Presi 2012). The ad industry seems to be largely detached from the scientific

basis that explores ad effectiveness and this article sheds some light on that issue. People decide upon ads based on their immediate emotional state, which the ads undoubtedly affect, however the ultimate goal of an ad is not to affect the emotions, but to affect consumer behavior in the intended way – a goal many PSAs quite often miss.

2. A substantial amount of research has been done in determining what types of appeals affect behavior most effectively in promoting sustainable practices (Bohner and Schlüter 2014; Cialdini 2003; Griskevicius, Cantú, and Vugt 2012; Sundie et al. 2012; Ulrich 1984) and there is little debate that normative appeals are the most effective way of achieving this goal (Poškus 2016). However, normative appeals might not elicit an apparent immediate emotional response (Nolan et al. 2008), therefore both ad creators and clients are likely to be discouraged from using these types of ads. Nevertheless, we urge practitioners to rely on scientific evidence instead of "gut feelings", and not to shy away from normative ads in promoting socially responsible practices, especially when you can make the normative ads more appealing by providing engaging and fun imagery alongside with them.
3. The present study demonstrated the clear advantage of PSAs with images over text-only ones. However, further studies are needed to explore the relation between PSA effectiveness, images, and different types of appeals by including such variables as emotions, attention, and information processing properties.
4. Better understanding of individual effects of images and appeals, as well as their interaction, would be very useful in further enhancing evidence-based creation of effective PSAs and other types of messages.

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Tinkamo sprendimo priėmimas: subjektyvus aplinkai palankių socialinių reklamų vertinimas

Anotacija

Tyrimu siekta įvertinti skirtingais kreipiniais ir iliustracijomis paremtų socialinių reklamų suvokimą. Pirmo eksperimento dalyviams vertino lankstinuką su viena iš 6 reklamų, sudarytų iš teksto (paremto neigiamos informacijos pateikimu, tiesioginiu prašymu arba normatyviniu kreipiniu), kuris pateiktas arba su teigiamo turinio paveikslėliu arba be jo. Antro eksperimento dalyviams pateikti trys lankstinukai su skirtingais kreipiniais be jokių vaizdų arba trys lankstinukai, kuriuose greta teksto buvo ir vaizdas. Rezultatai parodė, jog pateikiant lankstinukus be iliustracijų, dalyviai buvo linkę pasirinkti problemos mąstą išryškinančius kreipinius, o pateikiant lankstinukus su vaizdais, dalyviai pirmenybę teikė prašymu paremtiems kreipiniams.

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