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Consuming Green, Living Green? Boundary Conditions of the Licensing Effect.

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Sustainable consumption at $t=0$ may license people to behave unsustainably at $t=1$. We show that this effect is mitigated by one's sustainable self-view. We also find that self-licenses can be traded in only once and do not persist in subsequent situations ($t=2$).

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Consuming Green, Living Green? The Moderating Effect of Identity Relevance on the Licensing Effect

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Environmental sustainability and eco-friendly consumption have become important policy issues. An apparent threat to efforts aimed at the promotion of sustainable consumption is the licensing effect which proposes that buying sustainable products may subsequently license people to perform unsustainable behaviors. Such an effect would imply that the positive effects of consuming sustainably in one context are cancelled out by unsustainable behaviors in subsequent contexts. This paper investigates whether such licensing effects emerge within the sustainability domain, when they are especially likely, and what their boundary conditions are.

Research has shown that when people just behaved in a moral way they subsequently are more likely to permit themselves an immoral behavior. By performing the first moral act people establish so-called moral credentials which free (i.e., license) them to behave immorally in subsequent situations (Monin & Miller, 2001). For example, consumers are more likely to opt for vice products rather than virtue products after committing themselves to community service (Khan & Dhar, 2006) and people are more likely to steal and lie after purchasing eco-friendly products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Based on this we suggest that when people consume sustainably they build up moral credentials permitting them later on to behave unsustainably. We propose however that within the sustainability domain this licensing effect will be moderated by whether people have a sustainable self-view. When people value sustainability and see themselves as a sustainable person, they are more likely to make continuous sustainable decisions (Cornelissen, Dewitte, Warlop, & Yzerbyt, 2007; Verplanken & Holland, 2002). Therefore, we expect that the licensing will mainly occur among people who view themselves as a non-sustainable person.

To test our hypotheses we conducted four studies. First, Study 1 shows that behaving sustainably establishes moral credentials and makes people feel morally better than performing a neutral act. Specifically, students who imagined recycling waste perceived themselves as morally better than students in a control condition. Study 2 and 3 show that consuming sustainable goods provides people with a license to behave unsustainably on subsequent occasions and that this is mainly the case for people who view themselves as a non-sustainable person. Study 2 shows that participants who imagined buying organic (versus conventional) sneakers subsequently reported lower intentions to behave sustainably. Importantly, this effect was significantly stronger for participants viewing themselves as non-sustainable. Study 3 replicated and extended these findings. Participants who had just performed a task in which they purchased organic (versus conventional) fashion in an online store were subsequently more likely to approve of unsustainable consumer behavior. Again, this effect was stronger for participants who did not view themselves as a sustainable person. Furthermore, Study 3 examined whether the extent to which the organic clothing was labeled as “sustainable” affected the magnitude of the licensing effect (as research suggests that the licensing effect may be proportional; Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011). We did not find evidence for this: whether the organic nature of the clothing was strongly emphasized or just briefly mentioned did not impact the magnitude of the licensing effect. Perhaps

more importantly, Study 3 also demonstrated that an obtained license can be traded in only once. That is, we find a licensing effect on the first task measuring approval of sustainable consumer behavior, but not on the second task measuring sustainable intentions. In the fourth and final study we wanted to replicate our earlier finding that a license can be traded in only once. Furthermore, Study 4 investigated why people with a sustainable self-view do not show a licensing effect after performing a sustainable act. On the one hand, people with a sustainable self-view might not perceive themselves as having obtained a license by behaving in a sustainable manner. On the other, people with a sustainable self-view might be reluctant to trade in the license. Under the first hypothesis, people with a sustainable self-view should not display licensing effects in any moral domain (you cannot trade in a license if you haven't earned one). Under the second hypothesis, people with a sustainable self-view should not display licensing effects if the second behavior also falls within the sustainable domain. They might, however, display licensing effects in other moral domains, such as the purchase of (vice versus virtue products; Khan & Dhar, 2006). Our results are consistent with the second hypothesis: participants were more likely to choose the vice product after doing environmental community service than after reading about environmental community service, regardless of participant's sustainable self-view. It thus appears to be the case that people with a sustainable self-view do obtain a license by engaging in sustainable acts, however, they are unwilling to trade it in when it concerns sustainable behavior. Lastly, we replicated our earlier finding that an obtained license cannot be traded in limitless. Whereas we find a licensing effect on the first task, we no longer find an effect on the second task.

In sum, we have consistently demonstrated that consuming sustainable products may have a negative impact on subsequent sustainable actions, but only for people who see themselves as non-sustainable. Luckily, these findings are short-lived. Our results show that an obtained license may not be traded in limitlessly. Furthermore we show that people with a sustainable self-view do obtain a license when consuming eco-friendly but that they are unwilling to trade it in when it concerns sustainability, however, they are willing to trade it in when it concerns other immoral behaviors. An interesting implication of our finding is that people may be more likely to persist in their sustainable consumption behavior if it is made explicit to them that performing sustainable behaviors signifies that they are a sustainable person. In this way, people may come to see themselves as a sustainable person and start to act upon it (Cornelissen et al., 2007).

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