

Research on the Effect of Assertive Appeal on Consumer Behavioral Intention

Jie Wang, Jue Yang

School of Management, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China

Email: wangjie_ahu@126.com

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Abstract

Assertive appeal is common in green marketing, but how it affects consumer behavior intention remains to be further studied. With the introduce of psychological reactance theory in the field of communication, this study explores the psychological mechanism behind the effect of assertive appeal on consumer behavior intention, and meanwhile introduces effort investment to explore the boundary conditions of the effect of assertive appeal on behavior intention in public welfare domains. The results show that when consumer invests more effort in responding to appeals, assertive (vs. non-assertive) appeals lead to higher behavior intention. In contrast, the positive effects of assertive appeals will disappear for consumer with less effort. Psychological reactance plays a mediating role in the influence of assertive appeals and effort investment on consumer behavior intention. Based on the above conclusions, this study puts forward some suggestions on green marketing.

Keywords

Assertive Appeal, Effort Investment, Psychological Reactance

1. Introduction

With the rapid social and economic development of the country, people's material living standards have been constantly improved. Meantime, it also brought increasingly serious pollution and damage to the ecological environment, more and more enterprises and consumers began to realize the importance of environmental protection. However, there are obvious inconsistencies between consumer attitudes and behaviors in the face of environmental protection. Environmental protection behavior is more of an altruistic behavior. The beneficiaries are usually other people or society, and the direct benefits to individuals are relatively small. The motivation level of individuals to engage in environmental

protection behavior is usually low. Therefore, how to effectively convey environmental protection information to individuals and persuade individuals to act on environmental protection is of great significance.

In real life, public welfare appeals and slogans are widely used to persuade individuals to participate in environmental protection activities. As the main line connecting the whole advertisement, advertising slogan is the main content of the advertisement and is considered to have a crucial influence on the persuasion effect of the advertisement. In the field of environmental protection, assertive public welfare appeals have been widely used, such as “forbid” and “should”.

However, previous studies on the effect of assertive appeal communication are quite different. According to related research in psychology and linguistics, when communicating rules or requests to individuals, the milder and more polite wording is more effective. For example, studies have shown that when the supplicants use polite expressions of statements and questions, the supplicants are more likely to obtain satisfaction. However, some scholars have pointed out that compared with non-assertive information, there is a higher consistency between assertive information and the language expectation of high-power individuals, which makes the process of information processing smoother for individuals. Furthermore, this study focuses on the influence of assertive appeals in public welfare appeals on consumer prosocial behaviors and the psychological mechanism behind them.

Studies in the field of cognitive dissonance have shown that individuals' effort to an event will affect his or her selection preference in the relevant field. The higher the effort, the more positive the attitude toward the event. This paper introduces the level of effort as a moderating variable to explore the influence of assertive appeals on individual prosocial behavior under different levels of effort.

To sum up, this study explores the influence of assertive appeals (vs. non-assertive appeals) on consumer behavioral intention and the psychological mechanism behind it. The effort level is further introduced as a moderating variable to explore the possible boundary conditions for the influence of assertive appeals.

2. The Purpose and Meaning of the Research

Based on the theory of psychological reactance and cognitive dissonance, this paper deeply explores the influence of assertive appeals commonly used in the field of public welfare advertising on consumer behavioral intention, and explores the psychological mechanism and boundary conditions behind it. The mediating effect of psychological reactance and the moderating effect of effort level.

In terms of theory, most domestic studies at present analyze the advantages of assertive appeals from the perspectives of communication and linguistics. This study explores the negative impact of assertive appeals on consumer behavioral intention to enrich the research related to psychological reactance theory. At the same time, combining with the theory of cognitive dissonance, this study explores the possible influence of effort on the effect of assertive appeals, thus con-

tributing to the theory of psychological reactance.

In terms of practice, this study can provide certain basis for the content design and release scenarios in the field of green marketing, help to improve the persuasion effect of public welfare advertising, and further promote consumer behavioral intention.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Assertive Appeal

Assertive is a kind of expression that adopts assertive sentence method, is straightforward and straightforward, and directly requires individuals to take specific behaviors. Different from the statement and question voice, the assertive tone tends to be more directional, clearly putting forward requirements or rules for individual behaviors, and giving the audience of information no room for rejection (Miller, Lane, Deatrack, Young, & Potts, 2007). At present, the research on the effect of assertive appeal is controversial. Studies have shown that when individuals are in a positive emotional state, they tend to use more assertive, assertive, and confident language in their requests. At the same time, Kronrod, Grinstein and Wathieu (2012) has a higher behavior intention with the appeals expressed by assertive language in the context of hedonic products. However, some scholars have also shown that assertive appeals with strong language can lead to the individual's perception of freedom threat, lead to the individual's negative cognition and anger emotion, and thus reduce the persuasive power of appeals (LaVoie, Quick, Riles, & Lambert, 2017). To sum up, this paper studies the influence of assertive appeals in public welfare appeals on individual behaviors and the psychological mechanism behind them.

3.2. Psychological Reactance Theory

According to psychological reactance theory, people tend to believe that they have certain specific behaviors or freedom of choice and cherish this freedom. When such freedom is deprived or threatened, individuals will produce an offensive motivational state aimed at restoring the deprived or threatened freedom, namely "psychological reactance" (Brehm, 1966).

Freedom refers to a specific behavioral freedom derived from an individual's own experience or observation, such as choosing from a variety of alternative products and deciding whether to participate in promotional activities (Miron and Brehm, 2006). Different from the concept of freedom at the macro level, specific behavioral freedoms are often mutually independent, that is, threats to specific freedoms usually do not affect consumers' other freedoms (Wang & Wang, 2011). Psychological reactance is closely followed by the individual's perception of threats. According to the theory of psychological reactance, any force that makes it difficult for an individual to practice a certain freedom, or even any intention of persuasion, may be perceived by the individual as a threat to this freedom (Brehm, 1996). The greater the threat to an individual's perceived freedom, the greater the

psychological reactance caused by the threat (Quick & Stephenson, 2007). Produce psychological reactance can lead to the freedom of the individual recovery threatened motives, so that those who have been banned or dissuade behavior perceived attractiveness, and those who advocate or recommended behavior perceived less attractive (Buboltz & Thomas, 2002), and encourage the individual factors, according to the different situations in the aspect of cognition, and behavior to adopt a series of measures aimed at restoring free (Quick & Considine, 2008).

Based on previous studies, He, Tang and Zhang (2016) divided the freedom threats causing psychological reactance into three categories, namely, perceptual restriction, perceptual intrusion and perceptual manipulation intention. When individuals perceive that their freedom is limited, they will have psychological reactance, and they will have a higher desire or evaluation for those forbidden things. For example, a study showed that when a certain detergent was banned from sale in a certain city, the survey found that compared with other city residents, the evaluation of this detergent by city residents was significantly higher than that of other kinds of detergent (Mazis & Leslie, 1973). In addition, Moore and Fitzsimons (2014) studied the psychological reactance of individuals under the condition of being out of stock, and showed that customers with high trait resistance would have a higher desire for the goods in stock, and they would have a more positive attitude towards replenishment than those with stock in stock.

3.3. Effort Investment

Effort is a kind of resource input, which is internal, unstable, controllable and limited (Huang, Dong, & Mukhopdhyay, 2014). For example, the input of individual cognitive resources, physical energy and time. The more cognitive resources, physical energy and time an individual devotes to an event, the higher the level of effort.

Many researchers believe that people put effort into an event because they believe the positive consequences of the effort (Kruger, Wirtz, Boven, & Altermattcl, 2004; Zhang, Xu, Jiang, & Huang, 2010). For example, individuals participate in the collection and classification of recyclable materials in the belief that their actions contribute to environmentally beneficial outcomes; On the contrary, if efforts fail to bring the desired results to the individual, the individual's behavioral motivation will be weakened.

Scholars have found that for the goals selected by individuals, the more efforts they make to achieve the goals, the higher the value of the goals will be (Zhang et al., 2010). The effort to rationalize input is an important way to eliminate cognitive dissonance. For example, when individuals put in more efforts to protect the environment, they can rationalize their efforts by thinking that environmental protection is important.

In addition, effort has been shown to influence subsequent behavior. For example, scholars have found a link between individual effort and indulgent behavior. In other words, the higher the effort level of an individual in a task, the higher the

perceived right to enjoyment, and the more indulgent behaviors will be displayed in the following unrelated consumption experiments (Tong, Zeng, & Zhao, 2011).

4. Research Hypotheses

4.1. Effect of Assertive Appeals on Behavior Intention

Assertive appeals have been widely used in the field of environmental protection, but how they affect individual behavior remains to be further studied. Wang (2017) studied how assertive appeals in food appeals affect consumers' evaluation of food from the perspective of language expectations. Specifically, compared with low-power individuals, assertive appeals are more in line with the language expectations of high-power individuals, so the fluency of processing assertive appeals is higher and the food in appeals is perceived to be more delicious.

Other scholars have studied the assertive appeals in health promotion messages. Quick and Considine (2008) found that health promotion messages, such as assertive messages, would lead to anger and negative perceptions of the recipient of the information, thus resulting in a lower behavior intention with the information. In addition, scholars have studied the impact of assertive appeals in appeals on consumer purchase intention, and found that compared with pleasure goods, assertive appeals in real goods appeals will reduce consumer purchase intention.

This paper believes that compared with non-assertive appeals, assertive appeals in public welfare appeals put forward clear requirements for individual behaviors, and individuals feel offended, so they are reluctant to engage in pro-social behaviors advocated in messages. To sum up, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Compared with non-assertive appeals, assertive appeals will reduce consumer behavior intention.

4.2. The Mediating Effect of Psychological Reactance

According to the theory of psychological reactance, when an individual perceives that his freedom is threatened, it will produce a motivational state aimed at reconstructing the threatened freedom, and then take a series of measures to recover the threatened freedom cognitively or behaviorally. Many scholars have confirmed that in the face of appeals or persuasive behaviors from merchants, individuals will perceive the manipulative intention of merchants to their behaviors, thus reducing the persuasive effect of merchants.

The assertive appeal in the advertisement puts forward a clear demand for individual behavior, and the individual perceives that there is no space for rejection, which poses a threat to individual behavior freedom. Therefore, according to psychological reactance theory, when an individual perceives that his or her freedom of behavior is threatened by assertive appeals, psychological reactance will occur, and then the freedom threatened by assertive appeals will be re-established by slandering or not participating in the behaviors advocated in the appeals. To sum up, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: Psychological reactance plays a mediating role in the effect of assertive appeals on consumer behavior intention.

4.3. The Moderating Effect of Effort Investment

Previous studies have shown a link between effort and goal value, confirming that the more effort an individual put into the autonomous goals, the higher the value of perceived goals will be. Accordingly, the more effort an consumer puts into an event, the higher the value of the perceived behavior and the higher the importance of the event. According to the theory of psychological reactance, the level of consumer psychological reactance depends on the freedom of being threatened, and the greater the threat of perceived freedom, the higher the level of psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966).

When more efforts are put into advocating behavior in appeals, the greater the importance of consumer perceived behavior is. Therefore, in the face of assertive appeals, consumer will feel that this appeal is reasonable, which reduces the threat of assertive appeals to individual freedom, and thus improves consumer behavior intention. To sum up, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

H3: The degree of effort investment will moderate the effect of assertive appeals on behavior intention.

H3a: When effort investment is low, assertive (vs. non-assertive appeals) will reduce consumer behavior intention.

H3b: When effort investment is high, assertive appeals (vs. non-assertive appeals) will increase consumer behavior intention.

5. Research Experiments

The experiment showed the subjects public welfare appeals with different appeals, compared the effects of appeals with different appeals on the subjects' pro-social behaviors, and explored the mediating effect of psychological reactance and the moderating effect of efforts. The experiment used a two-factor intergroup design with 2 advertising appeal types (assertive vs. non-assertive) and 2 effort levels (high vs. low), with the pro-social behavior chosen to reduce the use of plastic bags.

5.1. Research Subjects and Processes

5.1.1. Subjects

In this experiment, 103 students were randomly selected from an university in Guangdong, 2 invalid questionnaires were removed, and a total of 101 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, male subjects accounted for 40% and female subjects accounted for 60%; the average age of participants was 23.5; In terms of education level, 77.3% are undergraduates, 28.7% are masters and 4.0% are PhD students.

5.1.2. Research Processes

All participants were invited to participate in a charity event called "say goodbye to

plastic bags.” participants were shown a commitment to the event, and were randomly assigned to one of four groups. The subjects in the high-effort group were required to completely copy and sign the commitment letter, which took about 2 - 4 minutes to complete, shown in appendix. Participants in the low-effort group only had to sign the commitment form. “I think I spent a lot of energy/time”.

The participants were then shown posters of the charity event, in which the assertive appeal group was shown messages in a strong tone and the slogan “please stop using plastic bags!”, as shown in **Figure 1**. The message for the non-assertive group took a more modest form “stay away from small plastic bags,” as shown in **Figure 2**.

The subjects filled in the assertive appeal manipulation test scale, “the message conveyed by posters and codes of conduct is powerful”, “the tone of posters and codes of conduct is strong” and “the wording of posters and codes of conduct is strong”. Finally, the participants’ behavioral willingness to reduce the use of plastic bags and psychological reactance were measured. Behavioral willingness refers to **Bezzina and Dimech (2011)**, including “after watching this poster, how confident/certain/certain/likely are you to reduce the use of plastic bags?. The psychological reactance scale, adapted from **Hong (1989)**, includes 6 items including “I am somewhat disgusted by being asked not to apply plastic bags” and “I don’t like people trying to influence my decision on the use of plastic bags”.

Please Stop Using Plastic Bags!

From now on, you must stop using any disposable plastic bags, for the use of plastic bags, must be recycled as far as possible, in order to reduce white pollution, but also should actively participate in the plastic bag prevention propaganda.

For the sake of our green mountains and rivers, please take action at once and stop using plastic bags.

Figure 1. Experimental material (assertive appeal).

Stay Away From Small Plastic Bags

In life, you can try to reduce the use of disposable plastic bags, for the use of plastic bags, as far as possible recycling, in order to reduce white pollution, but also can actively participate in the plastic bag prevention propaganda.

For the sake of our green mountains and clear waters, take action and stay away from small plastic bags.

Figure 2. Experimental material (non-assertive appeal).

5.2. Research Results

5.2.1. Manipulation Check

The high effort group reported higher effort input than the low effort group ($M_{\text{high}} = 8.25$, $M_{\text{low}} = 3.28$, $t = 16.64$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the effort investment manipulation was successful. Subjects in the assertive group perceived stronger appeal tone than those in the non-assertive group ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.82$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}} = 3.34$, $t = 17.54$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the manipulation of appeal type was successful.

5.2.2. Research Analysis

Anova was conducted with consumer behavioral intention as the dependent variable, appeal type as the independent variable. The analysis results showed that the main effect of appeal was significant ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.13$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}} = 4.41$, $F = 12.326$, $p < 0.05$), and H1 was confirmed.

Based on the Suggestions of Hayes and Scharkow (2013), Chen, Zeng and Liu (2013), this paper use the Bootstrap method to examine the mediating role of psychological reactance in the influence of effort level on behavioral intention. Model 4 was selected, with the type of advertising appeal as the independent variable, psychological reactance as the mediating variable, and prosocial behavioral intention as the dependent variable. The sample size was set at 5000, and the deviation correction method was adopted to select the 95% confidence interval. The data results show that psychological reactance of the mediating variable is significant, the estimated mediating effect is -1.10 , and the estimated interval does not include 0 ($LLCI = -1.68$, $ULCI = -0.53$), which support H2.

Anova analysis was conducted with prosocial behavioral intention as the dependent variable, appeal type as the independent variable, and effort investment level as the moderating variable. The interaction between appeal type and effort investment was significant ($F = 13.082$, $p < 0.001$). Under the condition of low effort investment, there is significant difference in the influence of assertive appeals and non-assertive appeals on individual behavioral intention ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.04$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}} = 4.17$, $F = 3.994$, $p < 0.001$), support H3a. On the contrary, assertive appeals (vs non-assertive appeals) have a positive effect on consumer behavioral intention under conditions of high effort investment ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.22$, $M_{\text{non-assertive}} = 4.65$, $F = 9.226$, $p < 0.01$), as shown in Figure 3,

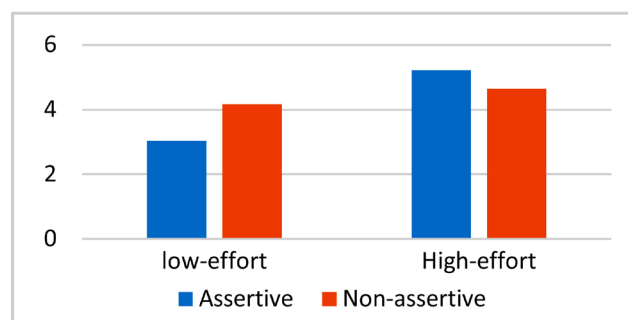


Figure 3. The effect of appeal type and effort investment on behavior intention.

thus support H3b.

The results show that the effect of appeal type on behavioral intention is moderated by the degree of effort investment. Specifically, when effort investment is low, assertive appeals have a negative impact on consumer pro-social behavior intention. However, when effort investment is high, assertive appeals have a positive impact on consumer pro-social behavior intention.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This research shows that 1) compared with non-assertive appeals, assertive appeals will reduce consumer behavior intention; 2) psychological reactance plays a mediating role in the effect of assertive appeals on consumer behavior intention; 3) the degree of effort investment will moderate the effect of assertive appeals on individuals' behavior intention; when effort investment is low, assertive (vs. non-assertive appeals) will reduce consumer behavior intention, however, when effort investment is high, assertive appeals (vs. non-assertive appeals) will increase consumer behavior intention.

In terms of theoretical significance, there are few empirical studies on assertive appeals. This paper introduced the effort level as a moderating variable to explore the influence of assertive appeals in public welfare appeals on individual prosocial behavior and the intermediary mechanism of psychological reactance, further enriching the research in the field of assertive appeals and psychological reactance.

In terms of practical significance, the research results of this paper have certain reference significance for the selection of public welfare and business strategies. First, according to the results of the study, individuals with higher effort showed more positive responses to assertive appeals than non-assertive appeals. Therefore, different communication strategies can be adopted according to the characteristics of the audience when public welfare appeals are launched and publicized, so as to improve the communication effect of public welfare appeals. Secondly, before the display of appeals, advertisers can attract individuals to participate in activities in various ways. When individuals invest a certain amount of time or energy into the event, assertive advertising appeals can often play a higher advertising effect.

Finally, this paper still has many shortcomings and can be improved. First, the method used in this paper to manipulate effort is to have individuals complete a transcription task, but in real life, it remains to be considered whether individuals are willing to actively put in the effort to participate in the task. In the future, we can choose an effort manipulation method more in line with life situation to further verify the influence of assertive appeals on individual behavior. In addition, the types of public benefit behaviors can be further divided in the future. For example, whether the prosocial behaviors under the condition of publicity will be affected by the types of advertising appeals remains to be further explored.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

"Say goodbye to plastic bags" pledge

For the sake of clear water and green mountains, for the sake of a better earth, I promise:

1. Minimize or avoid the use of disposable plastic bags and choose other substitutes;
2. For the used plastic bags, I will take the initiative to recycle and reuse them to reduce pollution;
3. Inform friends and relatives of the disadvantages of using disposable plastic bags and discourage them from using them.

(please complete the declaration on the line and sign your name)

Name: _____
