

**Unraveling the effectiveness of sustainability performance communication: Role of message framing**

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## **Introduction**

Tourism service providers (TSP) are increasingly engaging in sustainability initiatives to provide sustainable travel choices to travelers in response to growing public consciousness of environmental problems and demand for environmentally friendly products or services. As such, they are increasingly reporting on sustainability performance in their sustainability communication. For example, ITC Grand Central Mumbai reported a 48% reduction in water consumption compared to LEED®'s standard for large-size luxury hotels in their sustainability communication. These messages are purposefully framed to arouse social responsibility, increase transparency, build brand credibility, and persuade travelers to make pro-sustainable travel choices. While prior research has shown the usefulness of providing objective information in sustainability communication (Kang & Sung, 2021), less emphasis has been placed on the persuasiveness of communicating sustainability performance.

While most of the literature on framing has focused on valence framing effects (e.g., Grazzini et al., 2018), we examine the effects of emphasis framing in sustainability communication. Emphasis framing effects focus on a subset of potentially relevant considerations of an issue to be communicated rather than presenting precisely the same information. It gives messages meaning and suggests how people should interpret them (Palmeira et al., 2016). This is especially important in our current study context because sustainability communication necessitates an unequal communication of enhancement and reduction framing to the potential customers of TSP. The former conveys increasing positive environmental impact (e.g., absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the atmosphere), while the latter conveys reducing negative environmental impact (e.g., reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions into the atmosphere), even though both are comparable sustainability efforts.

Hence, our study aims to assess if the enhancement (vs. reduction) framing in sustainability performance communication can effectively persuade travelers to make pro-sustainable travel choices.

Furthermore, we examine perceived commitment to sustainability (PCS) as the underlying mechanism of the persuasion process. PCS refers to the traveler's beliefs about a TSP's apparent commitment to environmental sustainability, leading potential travelers to form beliefs about a TSP's position on sustainability issues (Sparks et al., 2013). As such, research has shown that travelers' perceptions of TSP's commitment to sustainability may influence travelers' behavioral intentions (Kapoor et al., 2022). We have studied the sustainability performance level as a boundary condition, which refers to the objective presentation of an environmental sustainability claim with a factual foundation on the progress in a sustainability initiative across different performance levels. It consists of two elements: the focal information that specifies the actual magnitude of progress in the sustainability initiative (e.g., "25 percent"; i.e., level) and the semantic cue (e.g., "reduction in"; associated with reduction framing). TSP differ in their progress toward sustainability; thus, examining the effectiveness of different performance levels is a meaningful research endeavor.

Our study is rooted in the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) and mindset theory. ELM proposes that contingent on an individual's motivation and capability, his/her elaboration likelihood will vary, which defines the route, central or peripheral, through which persuasion may happen (Petty et al., 1983). According to mindset theory, consumers have either an incremental or an entity mindset regarding the malleability of their traits, and this mindset shapes consumer behavior (Murphy & Dweck, 2016). That is, ELM can explain how travelers receive and process sustainability messages (MacDonald et al.,

2016), whereas mindset theory can explain travelers' behavior (Seo et al., 2021). Thus, ELM and mindset theory are central explanations for traveler behavior.

The current research investigates whether presenting the information on sustainability performance is persuasive. If so, whether communicating the sustainability performance in enhancement or reduction framing is persuasive. Besides, this study investigates the underlying mechanism, i.e., PCS, which influences travelers' behaviors by communicating sustainability performance. We also pioneer examining the moderating effect of sustainability performance levels on the relationship between sustainability performance communication and pro-sustainable travel choice.

## **Method**

Six experiments were conducted. Study 1a assessed the effectiveness of sustainability performance communication (absent vs. enhancement vs. reduction framing) using a Facebook experiment in an eco-friendly hotel and energy-saving context. Study 1b replicated the findings of Study 1a in a controlled laboratory experiment conducted in the context of eco-friendly hotels and water management. Studies 2a to 2c examined the mediating role of perceived commitment to sustainability in various tourism contexts (hotels, tourist attractions, safari tours) and sustainability practices (energy consumption, waste management, fuel consumption). Study 3 examined the boundary condition of sustainability performance level in the effectiveness of communicating sustainability performance.

## **Results**

We found that communicating the sustainability performance of a TSP increases users' click-through behavior on Facebook more effectively than not communicating

sustainability performance information. Furthermore, enhancement framing was more effective than reduction framing in predicting Facebook users' click-through behaviors, indicative of external validity (Study 1a).

Through a series of laboratory studies, we found out (1) that communicating sustainability performance using the enhancement framing and the reduction framing resulted in a higher intention to stay at an eco-friendly hotel than the absent condition. We found that using the enhancement framing leads to a higher intention to stay than reduction framing (Study 1b). (2) through Studies 2a to 2c that PCS mediates the relationship between sustainable performance communication and travelers' intention to engage in pro-sustainable travel choices in different tourism contexts. (3) the effect of sustainability performance communication (enhancement vs. reduction framing) on the PCS and pro-sustainable travel intentions is contingent on the sustainability performance level. More specifically, travelers are more likely to make pro-sustainable travel choices when the TSP communicates an enhancement framing with a medium sustainability performance level. However, for reduction framing, a high sustainability performance level results in a higher likelihood of adopting the eco-friendly hotel (Study 3).

## **Conclusion**

Our study adds to the literature on the effectiveness of sustainability performance communication, message framing, pro-environmental persuasion process, and communicating sustainability information in the tourism context. Additionally, understanding how pro-sustainable travel choices are elicited by communicating the sustainability performance can help tourism marketers better design tourism sustainability performance communication and sustainability marketing strategy and allocate organizational resources more efficiently.

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