

Message assertiveness and price discount in prosocial advertising: differences between Americans and Koreans

Message
assertiveness
and price
discount

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Abstract

Purpose – Prosocial advertisers widely use assertive messages to encourage prosocial attitudes and behaviors, but ironically, assertive messages may cause reactance. By applying cultural theories and the reciprocity principle, this study aims to observe whether consumers' responses to assertive messages hold across culturally different audiences (Americans vs South Koreans) and different consumption situations (price discount vs no discount).

Design/methodology/approach – American and Korean participants take part in three experimental studies examining the interactions of nationality, price discounts and assertive messaging for influencing consumer responses, first to a prosocial ad encouraging recycling (Study 1), the second for a campaign requesting donations for disadvantaged children (Study 2) and the third to prosocial messages encouraging water conservation (Study 3).

Findings – The three experiments strongly support the moderating role of price discounts and cultural backgrounds in the persuasiveness of assertive prosocial messages. American consumers generally dislike assertive messages, but feel reciprocal obligations if marketers include price discounts, whereas South Korean consumers accept both assertive and nonassertive messages without resistance, and discounts have no effects on persuasion.

Research limitations/implications – The findings make two key contributions to the literature and to prosocial advertising practices. First, although many corporations have adopted philanthropic strategies, few researchers have examined how specific consumption contexts determine the effectiveness of prosocial persuasion. The findings show how price discounts and message framing potentially alter the effectiveness of



prosocial messages across Eastern and Western cultures. Second, assertive language evokes reactance, but the findings suggest that reactive responses to prosocial advertising are culture-specific.

Practical implications – International nonprofit organizations and brands using philanthropic strategies might use the guidelines of this study for tailoring strategic, practical prosocial messages that will appeal to consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds. In particular, pro-environmental and charity campaigns targeting North American or Western European populations may consider bundling discounts into promotions to evoke reciprocity.

Originality/value – Findings provide novel implications for social marketers regarding on how to couple message assertiveness and price discounts to maximize the success of prosocial messages in different cultures.

Keywords Reactance, Reciprocity, Price discounts, Assertive messaging, Prosocial advertising

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Many consumers prefer to purchase from socially responsible companies (Vaaland *et al.*, 2008; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). In choosing between two brands of equal quality and price, 90% of consumers will choose cause-related products (Cone Communications, 2017). Ethical consumption reflects increasing concerns about social issues, such as environmental degradation and poverty. Recognizing that prosocial images are important, marketers often proactively encourage prosocial, responsible consumption (Baek *et al.*, 2019; Baek and Yoon, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2019; Romani and Grappi, 2014; Yoon and Oh, 2016; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). For example, brands often include motivational recycling messages on their packaging. Similarly, socially conscious brands often promote charitable giving at registers or checkout points (Engage for Good, 2017). Nevertheless, point-of-purchase solicitation is challenging because some prosocial behaviors benefit often unspecified individuals or the larger society rather than individual consumers. Persuasion can be inefficient if messages are too broadly cast and inadequately tailored to specific consumption contexts or consumer characteristics (Bigné *et al.*, 2012). Thus, message and audience factors are essential for prosocial persuasion (Follows and Jobber, 2000).

We undertook this research to examine the influence of three factors: assertive versus nonassertive advertising messages; message recipients' cultural backgrounds; and price discounts. First, assertive messages using an imperative language such as "You must recycle" can provoke reactance by threatening autonomy, so that messages fail to persuade (Baek *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Kronrod *et al.*, 2011, 2012). Second, cultural backgrounds may determine the effectiveness of message assertiveness: message recipients in Western cultures are more likely show psychological reactance, but consumers in Eastern cultures will be equally receptive to assertive and nonassertive messages (Kim *et al.*, 2017). However, scant attention, if any, has been paid to the possibility that price discounts may alter the joint effects of messages. In this research, we fill the gap by focusing on how price discounts change the dynamics of message assertiveness and cultural differences.

Specifically, we study whether consumers in Western and Eastern cultures will be more or less receptive to assertive messages indicating full versus discounted product prices. Although messages connected with full-price ads tend to be less persuasive, they are more persuasive when buyers learn that they will pay less than they initially expected, which causes them to feel gratitude and desires to reciprocate by complying with seller requests, a phenomenon called the *reciprocity principle* (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Cialdini, 2009; Xia and Bechwati, 2017). Indeed, consumers who are motivated to do good tend to respond better to assertive prosocial messages (Kronrod *et al.*, 2012).

The USA and South Korea fall at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum regarding attitudes toward *individualism* and *power distance* (Hofstede, 1983a, 1983b). Americans adhere to

individualistic values, such as autonomy, personal freedom and ambition, and tend to value low power distance, while Koreans value collectivism, in-group harmony and hierarchical power distance (Hofstede, 1983a, 1983b). Consequently, East–West differences emerge in reactions to compliance-seeking commands: Americans (Koreans) will show reactive (compliance) responses to assertive messages. However, price discounts may alter their reactions.

Our findings make two key contributions to the literature and to prosocial advertising practices. First, although many corporations have adopted philanthropic strategies, few researchers have examined how specific consumption contexts determine the effectiveness of prosocial persuasion. We show how price discounts and message framing potentially alter the effectiveness of prosocial messages across Eastern and Western cultures. Second, assertive language evokes reactance, but we suggest that reactive responses to prosocial advertising are culture-specific. Therefore, our findings provide novel implications for social marketers regarding how to couple message assertiveness and price discounts to maximize the success of prosocial messages in different cultures.

Literature review and hypotheses

Discount effects on prosocial compliance

As public attention turns to essential needs for ethical consumption, corporations are increasing their prosocial profiles by publicizing their support for prosocial causes (Forbes, 2019). They often persuade consumers to support positive causes by offering price discounts on socially beneficial products or services (Gamliel and Herstein, 2012; Tseng, 2016; Yoon *et al.*, 2014; Zhu *et al.*, 2019; Zollo *et al.*, 2018). For instance, Starbucks offers discounts to customers who bring their own reusable cups. The Eileen Fisher clothing company provides discounts to customers who donate gently worn clothing to support programs that benefit women around the world.

Marketing researchers have investigated how price discount strategies affect various consumer behaviors, including perceptions of advertising (Kim *et al.*, 2019; McKechnie *et al.*, 2012; Gamliel and Herstein, 2012), brand choices (Lattin and Bucklin, 1989), brand satisfaction (Yoon and Vargas, 2010), post-purchase consumption (Lee and Tsai, 2014), value perceptions (Yoon *et al.*, 2014), customer reviews (Zhu *et al.*, 2019), purchase quantities (Yoon and Vargas, 2011) and charitable giving or buying (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Tseng, 2016; Xia and Bechwati, 2017).

Studies showing that price discounts encourage green consumerism and social responsibility are particularly relevant to our context (Tseng, 2016). Green or prosocial behaviors such as recycling, donating and carrying reusable containers require both monetary and nonmonetary sacrifices (Yoon *et al.*, 2016; Zeithaml, 1988), while price discounts are perceived as monetary gains that offset potential sacrifices (Tseng, 2016). Thus, consumers are more willing to comply with the socially responsible request to purchase cause-related products when it is combined with a price discount (Tseng, 2016; Xia and Bechwati, 2017). For instance, field experiments using about 17,000 consumers showed that moderate price discounts motivate consumers to support advertised causes (Andrews *et al.*, 2014).

Price discounts are often conditionally bestowed on consumers who adopt prosocial behaviors (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Tseng, 2016). For example, The Body Shop offers a discount only to consumers who return used bottles. Other times, companies offer discounts and then make the prosocial requests when consumers are checking out or after they have used the product. Amazon often offers discounts at initial purchase stages and then asks for charitable donations on checkout pages. The discounts are unconditionally awarded, even if shoppers ignore the request, but tend to increase compliance with donation requests (Xia and Bechwati, 2017).

We examine whether unconditional discounts will increase compliance with subsequent prosocial requests. Consumers tend to have elevated moods when they perceive that they have “gotten a good deal” (Lichtenstein *et al.*, 1990). Similarly, discounts cause shoppers to feel relieved about saving money. Their elevated mood will cause them to favorably evaluate the store and their overall shopping experience (Heilman *et al.*, 2002). The reciprocity principle explains that consumers feel gratitude and psychological pressure to reciprocate when they perceive that companies have provided discount benefits. As a result, consumers increase purchases and support matters significant to the company, including prosocial requests (Andrews *et al.*, 2014; Dahl *et al.*, 2005; Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Ha *et al.*, 2006; Janakiraman *et al.*, 2006; Morales, 2005; Xia and Bechwati, 2017).

Reactions to assertive messages

Prosocial marketers heavily rely on assertive, compliance-seeking messages, using forceful and authoritative words such as *must*, *now* and *do*, to pressure audiences to take immediate actions (Baek *et al.*, 2015; Kim *et al.*, 2017). Whether public or private, profit or nonprofit, organizations often use strong language to drive prosocial actions (Zemack-Rugar *et al.*, 2017). For example, UN Environment (UNEP) uses the slogan “Stop Talking, Start Planting.” A similar, bold approach for demanding public action is the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s well-known seat-belt catchphrase, “Click it or Ticket,” and American Hospital Association’s campaign “Share a Life! Donate Blood!”

Ironically, however, researchers in communications, psycholinguistics and consumer behavior have shown that assertive message framing can ricochet (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Henriksen *et al.*, 2006; Quick and Stephenson, 2008). That is, pushy requests may evoke hypervigilance, so that consumers avoid and reject messages (Janis and Terwilliger, 1962; Watson *et al.*, 1983). For example, an examination of TV condom ads revealed that imperatives such as “must” increase anger and lower intentions to comply (Quick and Stephenson, 2007). Similar results were found in examinations of social marketing domains such as antismoking campaigns (Grandpre *et al.*, 2003), exercise promotions (Quick and Considine, 2008), flossing recommendations (Dillard and Shen, 2005) and environmental advertising (Kim *et al.*, 2017).

Reactance theory may explain negative responses to assertive messages. Reactance, an unpleasant motivational arousal, emerges when people perceive threats to their freedom of choice (Brehm, 1966; Brehm and Brehm, 1981). Assertive language can make message recipients perceive threats to their freedom. They react with aversion and resistance to persuasion. Thus, contrary to the common belief, assertiveness and overt pressure can ironically increase perceptions of threat and motivate resistance to recommendations (Brehm, 1966; Brehm and Brehm, 1981; Dillard and Shen, 2005; Quick and Stephenson, 2007; Rains and Turner, 2007).

How do price discounts or the lack of discounts affect consumer motivations to comply with assertive messages? Will price discounts dampen the potential negative effects that may come from assertive messages? As discussed earlier, price discounts tend to elevate consumers’ mood state and people in positive moods tend to have relaxed perceptions of social rules, more flexibility and process language less systematically (Martin and Davies, 1998). They tend to use more assertive, direct language for making requests, and often underestimate the chances of being offensive (Forgas, 1998, 1999; Sinclair and Mark, 1992). When message tones or appeals match their expectations, consumers will perceive that messages are fluent and will be more compliant (Kim *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2018, 2019). When buyers pay less than they initially expected, they feel gratitude and emotional satisfaction, causing them to enjoy positive moods (Yoon and Vargas, 2010).

Further, aligned with the reciprocity principle, assertive prosocial messages tend to be more effective for consumers who are already motivated to be good actors (Kronrod *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, when consumers are motivated to give back to the company, we expect them to be more receptive to assertive prosocial messages because assertive prosocial messages are particularly explicit and intense and thus indicate that the firm deeply cares about the issue. Consequently, they will expect and comply with direct and assertive language (Kronrod *et al.*, 2011). Without price discounts, however, assertive message would trigger reactance. In summary, price discounts would elicit feelings of gratitude, reciprocal motivations, altered language expectations and receptivity to assertive messages.

Cultural background as moderator

We further propose that cultural background alters the interaction between price discounts and message assertiveness. To study the interaction, we focus on the USA and South Korea, which represent noticeably dissimilar cultural propensities (Choi *et al.*, 2015, 2020; Errmann *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Yoon *et al.*, 2016, 2020).

Hofstede's (1983a, 1983b) comprehensive framework shows that populations from various nations adhere to dissimilar value systems, which consequently affect their preferences, decision-making and behaviors. Particularly, relevant to our context are the cultural dimensions of *individualism* and *power distance* because these two dimensions could affect individuals' expectation and acceptance of compliance-seeking messages (Bond *et al.*, 1985; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2000).

First, the individualism–collectivism distinction represents the degree to which individuals' life belongs to the individuals or to a social group. The tenet of individualistic culture is individuals' autonomy and freedom, while the essence of collectivistic culture tends to be the in-group harmony (Triandis *et al.*, 1990). Thus, consumers from collectivistic cultures have increased tolerance for messages that potentially threaten autonomous freedom because of their comparatively lower desires for individual freedom. Accordingly, a recent study has found that assertive messages tend to backfire only in individualistic Western cultures, such as in the USA, where the individualism index is 91, but the boomerang effect disappears in collectivistic Eastern cultures, such as South Korea where the individualism index is 18 (Kim *et al.*, 2017).

Extending Kim *et al.* (2017), we expect the power distance to explain cultural differences in responses to assertive messages. Power distance refers to the degree to which such inequality is expected and accepted within a society (Hofstede, 1983a, 1983b). South Korea has a high power distance index of 60, indicating that its citizens tend to accept unequal power and hierarchical order. In contrast, the USA has a low power distance index of 40, indicating that Americans tend to value equal power relationships. Power distance affects prosocial behaviors (De Kort *et al.*, 2010; Winterich and Zhang, 2014), impulse buying (Zhang *et al.*, 2010) and price–quality judgments (Lalwani and Forcum, 2016). Citizens in lower power distance cultures show high levels of blood donations and charitable giving (De Kort *et al.*, 2010). Winterich and Zhang (2014) reported that when consumers from low power distance cultures (e.g. The USA) are temporarily activated with high power distance belief, they are less likely to donate to charity as they feel less responsible. The 2019 World Giving Index (Charities Aid Foundation, 2019) reported that USA has been the world's most generous country over the past decade (Power distance index: 40); China had the lowest score (PD index: 80).

Beyond individualism/collectivism effects, power distance should affect receptivity to language usage. In organizational settings, employees from high power distance cultures tend to be more tolerant of offensive and forceful verbal communication (Bond *et al.*, 1985). For instance, if bosses speak forcefully or even verbally insult subordinates, Hong King

citizens (PDI of 68) accept the behavior as more legitimate than Americans (PDI of 40) (Bond *et al.*, 1985). Consequently, US consumers are more likely to react negatively than Koreans to confrontational, compliance-seeking languages indicating hierarchical power.

In sum, studies of cross-national differences in cultural orientation collectively suggest that reactance to assertive communication might be particularly correlated with Western cultures where people value freedom of choice, uniqueness and equality in society (Buboltz *et al.*, 1999; Kim *et al.*, 2017; Savani *et al.*, 2008). For instance, in an experiment using participants from North America and India to test their reactance responses when faced with threats to their preferences (Savani *et al.*, 2008), participants were asked to choose one of five different pens. For participants in the usurped choice condition, the experimenter took their chosen pen away and replaced it with another; participants in the free choice condition kept the pen they wanted. The study supported the psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966): in the usurped choice condition, North Americans tended to devalue the replacement pen because they were denied their original choice. However, Indians expressed similar liking for both pens, suggesting a culturally dissimilar reactance against threats to freedom. In a test of reactions to advertisements, American consumers showed reactance to assertive persuasive messages, while Korean consumers equally liked assertive and nonassertive messages (Kim *et al.*, 2017).

Because of cultural differences in receptivity toward assertive messages, we expect that American consumers (Individualism index: 91; Power distance index: 40) will dislike when they perceive that assertive persuasion threatens their freedom, autonomy and equality, but a price discount will evoke pleasant feelings and desires to reciprocate. In contrast, Korean consumers (Individualism index: 18; Power distance index: 60) have relatively high tolerance for hierarchy in social values and systems, so they will show less reactance (Kim *et al.*, 2017): assertive and nonassertive messages will be similarly persuasive, with or without price discounts. Accordingly, we predict:

- H1.* American consumers will comply more highly with a nonassertive (vs assertive) prosocial message combined with no discount, but will comply more highly with an assertive (vs nonassertive) message combined with a discount.
- H2.* Korean consumers will equally comply with assertive and nonassertive prosocial messages, irrespective of discounts.

Further, we propose a mediated-moderation hypothesis. That is, for Americans, positive mood and reciprocity will sequentially mediate the effect of discount on message compliance such that assertive messages will increase mood, reciprocity and message compliance among discount recipients. Message assertiveness consequently moderates the mediation.

- H3.* For American consumers, message assertive will moderate the discount → mood → reciprocity → message compliance sequential mediation (Figure 1).

We conducted three lab experiments to test the proposed hypotheses. In Studies 1 and 2, we tested *H1* and *H2* using recycling and charity campaigns. In Study 3, we tested the mediation model (*H3*) using a water-saving campaign.

Study 1

Study design and participants

For Study 1, we used a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) × 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) × 2 (message: assertive vs nonassertive) between-subjects design. Participating in exchange for course credit were 190 students (61% men; 18 to 28 years-old

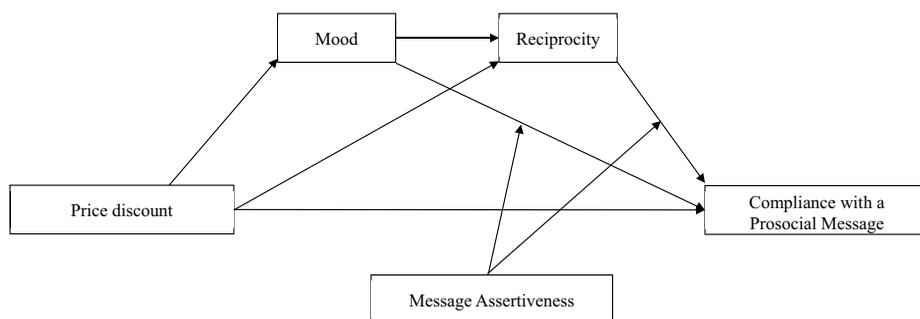


Figure 1.
Conceptual mediation
model

[$M = 21.02$, $SD = 2.48$]; 114 undergraduates from a northeastern university in the USA (66.7% men; 18 to 21 years-old [$M = 18.78$, $SD = 1.05$]) and 76 undergraduates from a university in Seoul, South Korea (52.6% men; 19 to 28 years-old [$M = 23.26$, $SD = 2.16$]).

Procedure

American and Korean participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) \times 2 (message: assertive vs nonassertive). We first asked them to imagine purchasing two packs of 24 Coca-Cola cans online and then receiving either a 0% or 20% discount at the checkout. They then viewed either an assertive or a nonassertive ad asking them to recycle the packaging that would come with their purchase. Then, participants completed measures of attitudes toward recycling.

Manipulation

Price discount. To manipulate the price discount (no discount vs discount), we used two scenarios. Participants in the full-price condition were told that they would receive no discount and would pay \$50. Participants in the discount condition were told that they would receive a 20% discount and pay \$40.

Message assertiveness. To manipulate message assertiveness, we used two ad stimuli with varying message assertiveness but maintaining the message content and design characteristics such as size, layout and font. Adopted from Miller *et al.* (2007), the assertive message used imperatives such as *should*, *have to* and *must*, while the nonassertive ad stimuli used suggestions, such as *could* and *may want to* (Appendix 1).

In all our studies, we avoid confounding effects from language differences by carefully translating the English copy to Korean. To deliver similar assertive and nonassertive tones, a bilingual translator carefully translated the English manipulations to Korean; a second bilingual translator back-translated the Korean version into English; and a third bilingual translator adjusted the copies (Choi *et al.*, 2020; Yoon *et al.*, 2020).

Measures

To measure attitudes toward recycling, we used four seven-point semantic differential items adopted from Blankenship and Wegener (2008), anchored with *bad/good*, *unfavorable/favorable*, *foolish/wise* and *negative/positive*. The four items were averaged to form a composite score ($\alpha = 0.94$). For a manipulation check, we measured message assertiveness by asking participants to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statement “The ad

message was assertive” on a seven-point scale anchored with *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7).

Results

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ($M_{assertive} = 4.33$) perceived the message to be more assertive than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ($M_{nonassertive} = 2.74$; $t(188) = 6.43, p = 0.000$). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ($M_{assertive} = 4.40$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 2.27$; $t(112) = 6.73, p = 0.000$) and South Koreans ($M_{assertive} = 4.22$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 3.41$; $t(188) = 2.17, p = 0.03$) perceived the assertive (vs nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) \times 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive vs nonassertive) ANOVA on attitude toward recycling as the dependent variable. Nationality had a significant main effect ($M_{American} = 6.62$ vs $M_{South\ Korean} = 6.33$; $F(1, 182) = 4.14, p = 0.04, \eta^2 = 0.022$), but price discount ($F(1, 182) = 0.57, p = 0.45, \eta^2 = 0.003$) and message assertiveness did not ($F(1, 182) = 0.52, p = 0.47, \eta^2 = 0.003$). Significant two-way interaction effects were found for price discount \times message assertiveness ($F(1, 182) = 5.26, p = 0.02, \eta^2 = 0.03$), but not for nationality \times price discount ($F(1, 182) = 1.72, p = 0.19, \eta^2 = 0.009$) and nationality \times message assertiveness ($F(1, 182) = 0.99, p = 0.32, \eta^2 = 0.005$). Relevant to our hypotheses was a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount, and message assertiveness on recycling attitudes ($F(1, 182) = 7.45, p = 0.007, \eta^2 = 0.039$) (Table 1).

To better understand the three-way interaction, we examined the price discount \times message assertiveness interaction for the American and South Korean populations. For Americans, a significant two-way interaction between discount and message assertiveness emerged ($F(1, 110) = 17.74, p = 0.00, \eta^2 = 0.14$). As Figure 2 shows, simple effect analysis results showed that the nonassertive message evoked more favorable attitudes toward recycling under the no discount condition ($M_{assertive} = 6.43$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 6.93$; $t(34.77) = -4.38, p = 0.000$). In contrast, the assertive message generated a higher mean score of attitudes toward recycling in the discount condition ($M_{assertive} = 6.80$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 6.17, t(25.28) = 2.19, p = 0.04$) (Figure 2). For Koreans, the two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness was nonsignificant ($F(1, 72) = 0.07, p = 0.80, \eta^2 = 0.001$): nodiscount condition ($M_{assertive} = 6.25$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 6.43$; $t(35) = 0.62, p = 0.54$); discount condition ($M_{assertive} = 6.23$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 6.51$; $t(37) = 1.13, p = 0.27$). Thus, the results supported *H1* and *H2*.

DV: attitude toward recycling	df	Mean saure	F	Sig.
Nation	1	2.31	4.14	0.04
Discount_type	1	0.32	0.57	0.45
Assertiveness	1	0.29	0.52	0.47
Nation * discount_type	1	0.55	0.99	0.32
Nation * assertiveness	1	0.96	1.72	0.19
Discount_type * assertiveness	1	2.93	5.26	0.02
Nation * discount_type * assertiveness	1	4.15	7.45	0.01
Error	182	0.56	–	–
Total	190	–	–	–
Corrected total	189	–	–	–

Table 1.
ANOVA (Study 1)

Discussion

Supporting our hypotheses, Study 1 shows that price discounts and cultural backgrounds jointly affect reactions to assertive pro-environmental messages. For Americans, the assertive message was more effective than nonassertive message when participants purchased a product with a discount, while the opposite pattern emerged in the absence of price discount. In contrast, for Korean, the persuasiveness of assertive and nonassertive messages did not differ regardless of price discounts.

The results support our predictions, but the USA and Korea have different environmental policies that might have intensified the three-way interaction. In particular, the USA has no national laws mandating recycling (Kim *et al.*, 2016). Many states do not regulate recycling, but a few cities and states, such as Seattle and Minnesota, have mandatory recycling laws for commercial entities. Thus, many American consumers view recycling as a matter of individual choice and free will (Kim *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, since the 1990s, the Korean Government has initiated mandatory recycling laws for collecting waste and reusing natural resources. For instance, residents are fined if they fail to separate general garbage, food waste and recyclable items. The cross-national differences in environmental policies might have affected how well participants received assertive messages with price promotions. In addition, the limited sample of Koreans ($n = 76$) may have caused the nonsignificant interaction effect between price discount and message assertiveness for Koreans ($H2$), because small samples increase the likelihood of Type II errors. Consequently, we used a larger sample in Study 2 and examined whether a different domain would show a similar data pattern.

Study 2

In Study 2, we conceptually replicated Study 1 with a different discount rate and different prosocial context: donations for children in need.

Study design and participants

For Study 2, we used a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) \times 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) \times 2 (message: assertive vs nonassertive) between-subjects design. Participating in exchange for course credit were 201 undergraduate students (59.7% men; 19 to 30 years-old [$M = 21.38$, $SD = 2.42$]), 95 from a northeastern university in the USA (66.3% men; 19 to 21 years-old [$M = 19.46$, $SD = 0.58$]) and 106 from a university in Seoul, South Korea (53.8% men; 19 to 30 years-old [$M = 23.11$, $SD = 2.11$]).

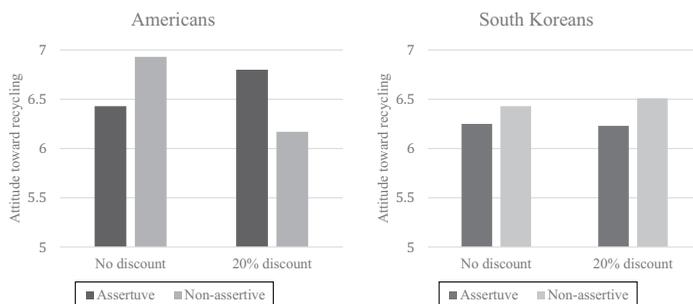


Figure 2. Comparison of price discount \times message assertiveness interaction effect on attitudes toward recycling between Americans and South Koreans (Study 1)

Manipulation

Price discount. Participants in the full-price condition were told that they would pay \$500 for a purchase and would receive no discount. Participants in the discount condition were told that would pay \$300, which included a 40% discount.

Message assertiveness. To manipulate message assertiveness, we created two versions of an ad promoting donations for disadvantaged children. As in Study 1, the assertive message used forceful imperatives such as *should*, *have to* and *must*, while the nonassertive message used soft appeals or suggestions such as *could* and *may want to*.

Procedure and measures

American and Korean participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. American (Korean) participants were first exposed to a reservation page, including details about an all-inclusive resort and casino trip to Tampa, FL (Kangwon Land Casino). We asked them to imagine booking the trip. At checkout, some received no discount; others received a 40% discount. Next they viewed a confirmation page featuring either an assertive or nonassertive message soliciting donations for underprivileged children. Participants indicated how much they would donate: \$0 to \$100 for Americans, and ₩0 to ₩100,000 for Koreans. One USD (\$) is approximately equivalent to 1,000 Korean Won (₩). In the analysis stage, we converted Korean Won (₩) into USD (\$).

Results

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ($M_{assertive} = 5.17$) perceived the message to be more assertive and forceful than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ($M_{nonassertive} = 3.36$; $t(199) = 7.31$, $p = 0.000$). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ($M_{assertive} = 4.94$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 3.53$; $t(93) = 3.75$, $p = 0.000$) and South Koreans ($M_{assertive} = 5.39$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 3.21$; $t(104) = 6.65$, $p = 0.000$) perceive the assertive (vs nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) \times 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) \times 2 (message assertiveness: assertive vs nonassertive) ANOVA on the donation amount as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of price discount ($M_{no_discount} = 15.51$ vs $M_{price_discount} = 21.47$; $F(1, 180) = 4.47$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) but no main effects of nationality ($F(1, 180) = 2.93$, $p = 0.09$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) or message assertiveness ($F(1, 180) = 0.16$, $p = 0.69$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$). Also, no significant two-way interaction effects were found: price discount \times message assertiveness ($F(1, 180) = 2.42$, $p = 0.12$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$); nationality \times price discount ($F(1, 180) = 2.06$, $p = 0.15$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$); nationality \times message assertiveness ($F(1, 180) = 0.00$, $p = 0.94$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$). Relevant to our hypotheses, as in Study 1, we observed a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount, and message assertiveness on recycling attitudes ($F(1, 180) = 4.39$, $p = 0.04$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) (Table 2).

To better understand the three-way interaction, we examined the price discount \times message assertiveness interactions. Americans showed a significant two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness ($F(1, 91) = 8.46$, $p = 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$). Consistent with the findings of Study 1, simple effect analysis showed that the nonassertive message without a price discount promoted higher donations ($M_{assertive} = 7.32$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 16.11$; $t(43) = -2.14$, $p = 0.04$). In contrast, the assertive message with the discount evoked higher donations ($M_{assertive} = 26.36$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 15.84$, $t(48) = 2.07$, $p = 0.047$), supporting *H1*. However, South Koreans showed a nonsignificant two-way interaction ($F(1, 89) = 0.12$, $p = 0.73$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$): no price discount condition ($M_{assertive} = 21.36$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 18.70$; $t(40) = 0.56$, $p = 0.58$); price discount condition ($M_{assertive} = 21.73$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 21.92$; $t(49) = -0.30$, $p = 0.98$) (Figure 3).

Discussion

Study 2 replicates Study1 and provides additional evidence supporting the hypotheses in another prosocial context, a charitable donation campaign. American participants indicated that they would donate more when they received a price discount at checkout, indicating that the adverse effect of message assertiveness was reversed. Koreans showed no differences in charitable donation amounts regardless of discounts or message assertiveness.

However, in Studies 1 and 2, we assumed but did not measure the underlying process by which price discount influences reactions to the assertive or nonassertive prosocial message. We did not examine effects of individual-level cultural values although power distance beliefs may vary among individuals within the USA and Korea. Also, we did not consider individual tendencies toward prosocial behavior. We have addressed those issues in Study 3.

Study 3

In Study 3, our goal was to replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with a different “Buy 1, Get 1 free” price promotion using a water conservation campaign, and to examine the mediating roles of mood and reciprocity as an underlying mechanism for the discount-assertiveness interaction effect.

Study design and participants

For Study 3, we used a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) × 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) × 2 (message: assertive vs nonassertive) between-subjects design. We

DV: donation amount	df	Mean saure	F	Sig.
Nation	1.00	951.21	2.93	0.09
Discount_type	1.00	1,454.23	4.47	0.04
Assertiveness	1.00	51.56	0.16	0.69
Nation * discount_type	1.00	670.85	2.06	0.15
Nation * assertiveness	1.00	1.58	0.00	0.94
Discount_type * assertiveness	1.00	787.27	2.42	0.12
Nation * discount_type * assertiveness	1.00	1,427.91	4.39	0.04
Error	180.00	325.11	–	–
Total	188.00	–	–	–
Corrected total	187.00	–	–	–

Table 2.
ANOVA (Study 2)

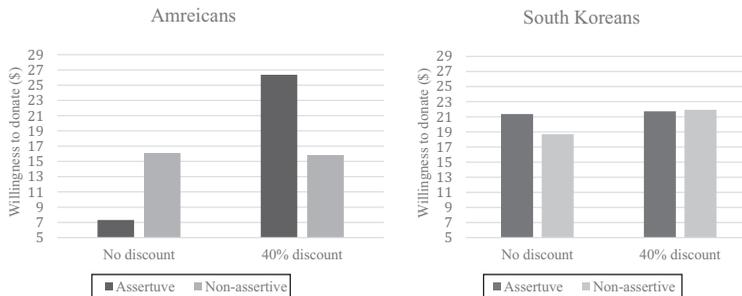


Figure 3.
Comparison of price
discount × message
assertiveness
interaction effect on
donation amounts
between Americans
and South Koreans
(Study 2)

also measured individual-level individualism and power distance. We recruited 248 undergraduates in exchange for course credit (50.2% men; 19 to 35 years-old [$M = 21.33$, $SD = 2.30$]); 128 from a northeastern university in the USA (61.4% men; 19 to 35 years-old [$M = 19.84$, $SD = 2.51$]); and 120 from a university in Seoul, South Korea (38.3% men; 19 to 28 years-old [$M = 22.92$, $SD = 2.88$]).

Manipulation

Price discount. To manipulate price discount, we asked participants to imagine purchasing four packs of toothpaste for \$20. Participants in the full-price condition were told that they would receive no discount. Participants in the discount condition were told that they would receive a “Buy 1, Get 1 Free” discount, giving them eight packs for \$20.

Message assertiveness. To manipulate message assertiveness, we created two versions of the water conservation campaign message that would be ostensibly printed on the toothpaste package. As in Studies 1 and 2, the assertive message used forceful imperatives such as *should*, *have to* and *must*, while the nonassertive message used soft appeals or suggestions such as *could* and *may want to* ([Appendix 2](#)).

Measures

Chronic power distance beliefs were measured with nine seven-point scale items from [Zhang et al. \(2010\)](#) ($\alpha = 0.81$). For example, “As citizens, we should highly value conformity,” and “In work-related matters, managers have a right to expect obedience from subordinates.” We administered [Singelis’s \(1994\)](#) six seven-point scale items ($\alpha = 0.78$) to measure chronic-level individualism, such as “I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects,” and “I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.” Next, mood was measured using three seven-point semantic differential scales anchored with sad/happy, unpleasant/pleasant and bad/good ([Baron and Bronfen, 1994](#)) ($\alpha = 0.95$). To measure reciprocity desires, we used two seven-point scale items: “I am willing to reciprocate by supporting the *Mallinis* brand”; “I expect to repay the favor received from *Mallinis*” ([Dorsch and Kelley, 1994](#)) ($\alpha = 0.87$). We measured individual predispositions to save water with two seven-point Likert scales, “It is my civic responsibility to use water efficiently”; and “I try to reduce my water use” ($\alpha = 0.85$). To measure behavioral intentions to comply, we asked participants how often they would practice the four suggested water-saving behaviors, measured (e.g. turn off the faucet while brushing teeth, use a cup instead of running faucets while brushing) on a seven-point Likert scale anchored with (1) never and (7) always. The answers were averaged to form a composite score ($\alpha = 0.80$).

Procedure

Both American and Korean participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. They read about a scenario in which they imagined purchasing four packs of toothpaste online. Those in the discount condition received a “buy 1, get 1 free” discount (i.e. a 1 + 1 promotion in South Korea) at checkout. Next, they viewed an assertive or a nonassertive message requesting water-saving measures. They were told that the message would be printed on the side of the package when it was delivered. Then, participants completed a survey.

Results

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.93$) perceived the message to be more assertive than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ($M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 3.27$;

$t(246) = 7.78, p = 0.00$). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ($M_{assertive} = 5.08$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 3.65$; $t(126) = 4.81, p = 0.000$) and South Koreans ($M_{assertive} = 4.77$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 2.85$; $t(118) = 6.45, p = 0.000$) perceived the assertive (vs nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs South Koreans) \times 2 (price discount: no discount vs discount) \times 2 (Message Assertiveness: assertive vs nonassertive) ANCOVA with individual predisposition to saving water as a covariate. The covariate significantly affected behavioral intentions to save water ($F(1, 237) = 61.80, p = 0.00$). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, even after we controlled for individual tendencies to conserve water, we found a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount and message assertiveness on water-saving intentions ($F(1, 237) = 8.40, p = 0.00, \eta^2 = 0.03$) (Table 3).

To better understand the interactions, we examined the price discount \times message assertiveness interaction for Americans and Koreans separately. Replicating findings of Studies 1 and 2, Americans showed a significant two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness ($F(1, 121) = 16.90, p = 0.00, \eta^2 = 0.12$). In particular, contrasts revealed that in the absence of the discount, Americans indicated stronger intentions for water conservation when they viewed the nonassertive message ($M_{assertive} = 3.78$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 4.89$; $t(65) = -4.19, p = 0.00$), while the presence of the discount reversed the effect ($M_{assertive} = 4.90$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 4.25$; $t(59) = 2.73, p = 0.01$). In contrast, South Koreans ($F(1, 115) = 0.30, p = 0.59, \eta^2 = 0.003$) indicated no such interactions in the no discount ($M_{assertive} = 4.00$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 4.14$; $t(56) = -0.37, p = 0.71$) or discount conditions ($M_{assertive} = 4.33$ vs $M_{nonassertive} = 4.40$; $t(60) = -0.24, p = 0.81$) (Figure 4).

Mediation analysis

To examine the process by which price discounts influence consumers' reactions to assertive versus nonassertive messages, we tested the sequential mediating roles of mood and reciprocity using bootstrapping analysis. Americans and Koreans did not differ in mood ($M_{american} = 4.88$ vs $M_{korean} = 5.11$; $t(246) = -1.28, p = 0.21$) and reciprocity ($M_{american} = 3.05$ vs $M_{korean} = 3.27$; $t(244) = -1.31, p = 0.19$).

In *H1* and *H2*, we predicted the discount-assertiveness interaction for Americans, but not for Koreans. Thus, to better understand the underlying mechanism, we conducted mediation analysis for American participants only. To examine the process by which price discounts influence American reactions to assertive versus nonassertive messages, we tested the sequential mediating roles of mood and reciprocity, using the PROCESS macro (Models 88; Hayes, 2017).

DV: water-saving intention	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Water_general_com	1.00	66.08	61.80	0.00
Nation	1.00	0.33	0.31	0.58
Discount_type	1.00	2.47	2.31	0.13
Assertiveness	1.00	2.16	2.02	0.16
Nation * discount_type	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.96
Nation * assertiveness	1.00	0.22	0.21	0.65
Discount_type * assertiveness	1.00	4.91	4.59	0.03
Nation * discount_type * assertiveness	1.00	8.98	8.40	0.00
Error	237.00	1.07	–	–
Total	246.00	–	–	–
Corrected total	245.00	–	–	–

Table 3.
ANOVA (Study 3)

As shown in Figure 5, the mediation analysis suggested that the model explains 7.0% of the variance in mood ($p = 0.00$), and the price discount had a significant positive effect on mood (0 = no discount, 1 = discount; $b = 0.78, p = 0.00$). The model explained 5.0% of the variance in reciprocity ($p = 0.05$). There was a significant direct effect of mood on reciprocity ($b = 0.17, p = 0.01$), but the direct effect of a price discount on reciprocity was not significant ($b = -0.09, p = 0.66$). The model explained 18.0% of the variance in individual water-saving intentions. Message assertiveness (0 = assertive, 1 = nonassertive; $b = 2.47, p = 0.00$), mood ($b = 0.27, p = 0.00$) and reciprocity ($b = 0.34, p = 0.00$) each had a positive effect on water-saving intentions. Also, while there was a significant interactive effect between mood and message assertiveness on water-saving intention ($b = -0.29, p = 0.03$), the interaction between reciprocity and message assertiveness was statistically insignificant ($b = 0.72, p = 0.09$). In sum, these findings suggest that the effect of a price discount on consumers' prosocial behavior is sequentially and fully mediated by consumers' mood and reciprocity, and the effect of mood interacts with message assertiveness.

Additional analysis

Based on Hofstede's power distance cultural dimensions, we examined varying levels of individualism and power distance beliefs among individuals living within the USA and

Figure 4. Comparison between Americans and South Koreans regarding discount × message assertiveness interaction effect on water-saving intentions (Study 3)

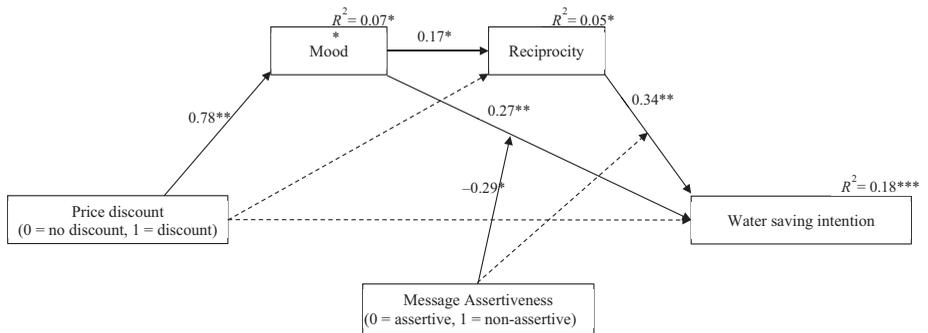
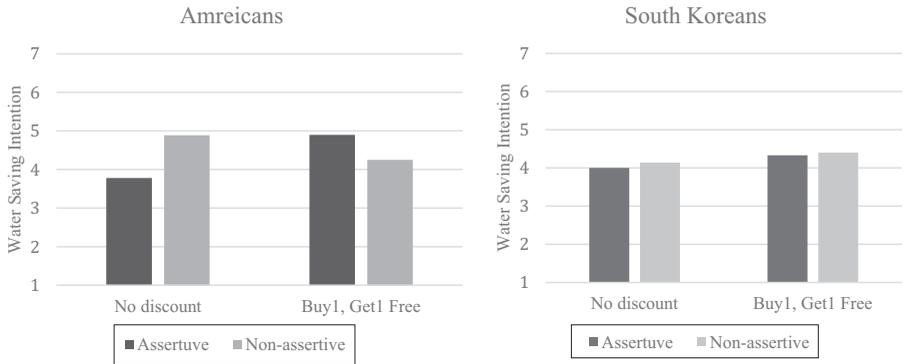


Figure 5. Mediation model (for the US sample)

Notes: ***Indicates $p < 0.001$; **indicates $p < 0.01$; *indicates $p < 0.05$

South Korea. The heterogeneous USA has a blended population of diverse ethnicities and races, so individual Americans may have substantially varying cultural orientations (Brewer and Venaik, 2012; Yoon *et al.*, 2020). Thus, we measured individual differences in chronic-level individualism and power distance.

We conducted a series of moderated regression analyses using PROCESS macro (Model 3; Hayes, 2017) with a discount and message assertiveness as categorical measures, and chronic individualism and power distance belief scores (irrespective of nationality) as a continuous measure. Chronic individualism did not moderate the interaction between discount and message assertiveness ($b = -0.06$, $t = -0.40$, $p = 0.69$), but when we entered chronic power distance into the model, the three-way interaction was significant ($b = -0.38$, $t = -2.84$, $p = 0.005$). Using the median split, we divided participants into those who scored high ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 59$) or low on PD ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 0.65$). Of 128 American participants, 97 (75.8%) were in the low PD group. Of 120 Korean participants, 93 (78 %) were in the high PD group. For the high PD group, the two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness was not significant ($F(1, 109) = 0.89$, $p = 0.35$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$), but for the low PD group, the two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness was significant ($F(1, 102) = 10.38$, $p = 0.002$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$). Contrasts suggested that for those with low PD, nonassertive (vs assertive) messages is more effective with no price discount ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 3.76$ vs $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 4.78$; $t(54) = -3.44$, $p = 0.00$), while the effect of message assertiveness is reversed with price discount ($M_{\text{assertive}} = 4.86$ vs $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 4.25$; $t(50) = 2.08$, $p = 0.045$). The data suggests that the power distance, but not chronic individualism, explains why Americans, but not Koreans, showed varying attitudes toward discounts and message assertiveness.

General discussion

Prosocial advertisers widely use assertive messages to encourage prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Kronrod *et al.*, 2012), but ironically, assertive messages may cause reactance (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Grandpre *et al.*, 2003; Quick and Considine, 2008). We applied cultural theories and the reciprocity principle to observe whether reactance responses to assertive message hold across culturally different audiences and different consumption situations. In three studies, we find strong evidence supporting the moderating role of price discounts and cultural backgrounds in the persuasiveness of assertive prosocial messages. We find that reactance responses emerge among Americans only when they pay full prices, but discounts reverse the effect. In contrast, Korean consumers equally favor both assertive and nonassertive messages, regardless of price discounts. We suggest that cultural differences regarding expectations and acceptance for power equality cause varying reactions. Further, our findings suggest that the price discount alleviate the principled negative effect of message assertiveness on consumers' prosocial behavior through consumers' elevated mood state and willingness to reciprocate.

Our studies make several theoretical contributions. First, building on psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), we question assumptions that humans are basically driven to desire-free choice, and that all people will resist threats to their personal freedom. Our findings suggest that human nature does not default to negative reactions to the psychological threats implicit in assertive messages. Instead, audience and situational factors determine whether assertive messages will evoke reactance. Most studies examining the relative effectiveness of assertive and nonassertive messages have overlooked reciprocity and culture (except for Kim *et al.*, 2017) and have generally observed attitudinal and behavioral responses to assertive versus nonassertive messages among consumers from North America or West European countries (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Grandpre *et al.*,

2003; Quick and Considine, 2008). However, we concur with Savani *et al.* (2008) in showing that long-standing assumptions about human desires for freedom or free choice apply more strongly to individualistic, low power distance cultures.

Our findings further extend Kim *et al.* (2017) in showing that consumers from low distance cultures, such as Americans, are more receptive to nonassertive messages, but price discounts can reduce reactance. In contrast, consumers from high power distance cultures, such as Koreans, find both assertive and nonassertive messages to be equally effective, despite discount scenarios. In Kim *et al.*'s experiments, American participants were exposed to either an assertive or a nonassertive message, but they may have preferred nonassertive messages because the experiments indicated no specific consumption contexts. Studies on assertive communications have identified product type (Kronrod *et al.*, 2012), issue importance (Kronrod *et al.*, 2012b), cultural background (Kim *et al.*, 2017) and effort investment (Baek *et al.*, 2015) as boundary conditions, but we introduce price discount as a new boundary condition.

Although some studies have incorporated cross-culture perspectives to investigate motivations for prosocial behaviors (Chan and Lau, 2002; Kalafatis *et al.*, 1999; Lavack and Kropp, 2003; Minton *et al.*, 2015; Singhapakdi *et al.*, 2001; Yoon *et al.*, 2020) or to analyze the contents of ads that appeal to different cultures (Carlson *et al.*, 1996), few studies have investigated the persuasiveness of different message strategies in culturally distinct nations. We compare the USA and South Korea, known to differ in many cultural dimensions (e.g. individualism, power equality; Choi *et al.*, 2015, 2020; Errmann *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2016, 2017; Yoon *et al.*, 2016, 2020). Accordingly, our findings may generalize to other populations from countries representing different dimensions of individualism and power distance.

Hofstede (1983a, 1983b) explained that many North American and Western European countries, including Canada, United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway and Ireland tend to have low power distance levels, so price promotions may counter adverse effects of assertive messages. In contrast, many East Asian and Eastern European countries such as China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey have high power distance levels. Thus, they might find assertive and nonassertive messages to be equally persuasive, with or without discounts.

International nonprofit organizations and brands using philanthropic strategies might use our guidelines for tailoring strategic, practical prosocial messages that will appeal to consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds. In particular, pro-environmental and charity campaigns targeting North American or Western European populations may consider bundling discounts into promotions to evoke reciprocity. For instance, during holidays when numerous brands are launching vacation price promotions, prosocial campaign marketers might compete by using assertive messages but soften their tones in the absence of price deals.

Our study opens paths for future research. First, future researchers may examine whether priming power distance could change the pattern of results (Yoon, 2013). Situational influences such as power distance priming may override original cultural orientations (Winterich and Zhang, 2014). For instance, if consumers from East Asia are primed with low power distance, would price discounts change their responses to assertive versus nonassertive messages? Several studies have indicated that East Asians will generally feel more indebted than North Americans after receiving help in everyday situations (Hitokoto, 2016; Hitokoto *et al.*, 2008), so we investigated desires to reciprocate as a mediator. Nevertheless, Study 3 indicated no significant differences in reciprocity desires between Americans and South Koreans. Thus, future research should investigate how various societal and marketing situations evoke different desires to reciprocate.

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Appendix 1

Assume that you order two packs of Coca-Cola cans online (24 cans per pack). You pay \$50 (\$40 including tax and delivery and receive no discount (20% discount). Two days later, you receive your order, with an environmental ad attached.

Assertive pro-environmental message

Nonassertive pro-environmental message

**RECYCLE
WHAT YOU CAN!**

There is really no choice!
Do something to recycle!

You **have to recycle** plastic container, paper, cardboard, aluminum and steel cans.

You **should definitely recycle more actively** to conserve natural resources, such as water, timber, and minerals.

You **must recycle as much as possible** to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change.

All you **have to do is to place the clean and dry material loose** into the recycling bin. In addition, you **ought to remove lids and caps** from containers when you recycle.

**IT'S WORTH RECYCLING
WHAT YOU CAN!**

The choice is yours!
You can do something to recycle!

You **could recycle** plastic container, paper, cardboard, aluminum and steel cans.

You **may want to recycle more actively** to conserve natural resources, such as water, timber, and minerals.

You **could recycle as much as possible** to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to global climate change.

It is **worth placing the clean and dry material loose** into the recycling bin. In addition, it makes **sense to remove lids and caps** from containers when you recycle.

Appendix 2 (study 3; buy 1, get 1 free condition)

Note – Assume that you order four packs of Mallinis toothpaste online for \$20, including tax and delivery. When you reach the checkout page, you see this message: “Buy 1, Get 1 Free.” Two days later, you receive eight packs. An attached message tells you how to conserve water while brushing your teeth.

Message assertiveness and price discount



Assertive message



Nonassertive message



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