

What makes threat ineffective in sustainability communication? The role of psychological reactance and green hypocrisy

Kai-Yi Young,^{a*} Shintaro Okazaki,^a Jörg Henseler^b

^aDepartment of Marketing, King's Business School, King's College London, London, UK

^bFaculty of Engineering Technology, University of Twente, Enschede, Netherlands

*Email: kai-yi.young@kcl.ac.uk, Tel: +44 (0)7711093686

Abstract

As sustainability gains wide recognition, the effectiveness of threat and efficacy has long been discussed. Though threatening appeals seem to be more effective in the past, some recent studies argue that threat appeals convey hopelessness and demotivate people to cope with climate change situation. Based on Protection Motivation Theory, the present research looks at the *ineffectiveness* of threat and efficacy in sustainability communication by exploring the role of affective psychological reactance and green hypocrisy. To this end, we conduct three experimental studies with U.S. general consumer sample. Overall, the results seem to indicate that consumers' perception of green hypocrisy in threatening messages acts as one of the causes of psychological reactance. Furthermore, we confirm the effectiveness of efficacy in influencing people's pro-environmental attitude, as well as the underlying psychological mechanisms leading to the ineffectiveness of threat in sustainability communication.

Keywords: protection motivation theory, threat, efficacy, psychological reactance, green hypocrisy, sustainability