

Influence of shame on young consumers' purchase intentions: a social sustainability perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the influence of social frame (worker vs animal rights), product category (hedonic vs utilitarian) and social presence (similar age, younger and older) on expected shame and purchase intentions for sustainable products.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used an online experiment with a 3×2 between-subjects design to manipulate social frame (workers vs animal rights and a control group) and product category (hedonic vs utilitarian) with 252 young German consumers (under 30 years old).

Findings – This study finds that social frame and social presence influence expected shame, which in turn positively affects purchase intentions for sustainable products, in the presence of people with similar age, but with no difference between hedonic and utilitarian product types.

Research limitations/implications – This study tested the influence of social frame, product type and social presence on German young consumers using specific purchase scenarios. Future research may test the generalizability of the model in diverse cultural settings.

Practical implications – This study would help marketers and public policymakers identify factors that may motivate young consumers to act in a sustainable manner and to develop suitable strategies and messages to improve their pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors.

Originality/value – This study uses Schwartz's norm activation theory to investigate the link between consumer emotions and sustainable consumption and shows that social sustainability can trigger expected shame through message framing especially in the presence of others, which in turn could increase the probability of environment-friendly product choice.

Keywords Product choice, Relationship marketing, Shame, Social marketing, Sustainability

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

With the emergence of the three-pillar model of sustainability, the social and economic impact of businesses are being highlighted in addition to their environmental responsibility (Schaltegger and Burritt, 2018). Social sustainability is seen as a prerequisite for the other two aspects as it can hamper the negative influence of economic and environmental deficiencies (Boyer *et al.*, 2016). In fact, as consumers become more concerned with the environmental and social efforts of companies, marketing is expected to have a key influence on the opinions and even the lifestyle of consumers. In this context, the term “transformative marketing” covers both environmental and socio-economic aspects of marketing (Kumar, 2018). Under this perspective, marketing can be used to achieve social acceptance (Frank and Brock, 2018), overcome inequality and injustice (Liu and Koivula, 2023) and encourage pro-environmental behaviors (Talwar *et al.*, 2022; Tandon *et al.*, 2020).

Consumer behavior is also influenced by emotions especially during decision-making at the point of sale (Herter *et al.*, 2021), as reflected in marketing tactics using anger, guilt and shame in social marketing campaigns (e.g. Brennan and Binney, 2010). Previous research shows that shame is the most common emotion that influences individuals based on negative messages and that it can lead to environmentally friendly behavior (Amatulli *et al.*, 2019; Paramita *et al.*, 2024). This effect is expected to be more pronounced among young consumers due to their greater awareness of and engagement with environmental issues (Paramita *et al.*, 2024; Ting *et al.*, 2024). For example, Paramita *et al.* (2024) show that self-protection, kin-care, status and affiliative motives influence adoption of electric cars, with performance expectancy mediating short-haul performance positively moderating the indirect relationship between these antecedents and electric cars adoption intentions. Similarly, Ting *et al.* (2024) exhort the young consumers to acquire skills and knowledge to make informed decisions in the current volatile information ecosystem.

Despite the useful contributions made by these studies, it is still not clear which factors may influence young consumers' sense of shame and their purchase intentions for sustainable products (Acuti *et al.*, 2022; Kabir, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2023). For example, Acuti *et al.* (2022) review 94 articles to identify emotionally aversive states (e.g. anxiety, shame, guilt and regret, among others) as responsible for unintended negative side-effects of product and service sustainability on consumer behavior. However, they do not provide any empirical evidence for these ideas. Kabir (2023) addresses this limitation with a longitudinal study of organic food continuance behavior (OFCB) of young (Generations Y and Z) Bangladeshi consumers using theory of planned behavior (TPB). Similarly, Khan *et al.* (2023) show that both relational and technological aspects influence green buying intention and actual consumption behavior by young consumers. However, both these studies ignore the impact of shame on the young consumers' purchase of sustainable products. As a result, there is no empirical evidence about the factors that may trigger a sense of shame in young consumers and the extent to which this may influence their purchase intentions for sustainable products and environmentally responsible behavior (Khan *et al.*, 2023).

We address this important research gap by drawing on social framing and norm activation theory (Schwartz, 1977), hedonic adaptation (Kahneman and Thaler, 2006) and social inhibition theory (Guerin, 1989) to identify the factors that may influence the expected sense of shame for consumers in the context of product choice against a background of social sustainability. We also examine the impact of expected shame on the young consumers' purchase intention in social sustainability context. We used an online experiment with a 3 × 2 design to manipulate social frame (worker vs animal rights and a control group) and product category (hedonic vs utilitarian) with a sample of 252 young German consumers.

Our results confirm that expected shame is influenced by social framing, but it may not lead to significantly different results, so the specific focus does not seem to play a role. Shame is also increased by the presence of others, especially when the others are people of similar age. Finally, expected shame leads to purchase of a socially sustainable product but with no significant difference between hedonic and utilitarian product categories. We discuss the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of these findings with the limitations of this study and some useful future research directions.

Theoretical background and hypotheses development

Social sustainability and marketing

Sustainability describes a stable, resilient and durable approach that aims to satisfy the needs of the current generation without jeopardizing the well-being of future generations (Khan *et al.*, 2023). Social sustainability refers to the quality of a society in terms of its cohesion and performance and a stimulus for the other two dimensions, as changing social practices can drive ecological improvements (Boyer *et al.*, 2016). Marketing is often held

responsible for problems such as unhealthy behavior and overconsumption (Olson, 2022; Parker *et al.*, 2019). However, it can also be a solution to these problems by promoting sustainable behaviors (Peattie and Peattie, 2009) and improving consumer attitudes toward sustainable products (Khan *et al.*, 2023; Gupta *et al.*, 2023). Social marketing is an approach that focuses on social sustainability (Boyer *et al.*, 2016), which focuses on behavioral changes of consumers that enable the implementation of social approaches and ideas. Social marketing has great potential in terms of stimulating sustainable consumer behavior, especially using emotions and humor appeals in marketing communication (Chamberlin and Boks, 2018).

Shame

Shame is a negative judgment about one's own person and results from self-reflection (Tangney *et al.*, 1998) resulting in a belief that a decision made, or associated action could be perceived as immoral or socially unacceptable by other people (Brennan and Binney, 2010; Tangney *et al.*, 1998). As a result, people with shame see themselves as unworthy of belonging to and being accepted by others as a result of public exposure of their inappropriate or deficient behavior (Tangney *et al.*, 1996). Shame can be a trigger for positive behavioral changes (e.g. coping mechanisms) intended to help reduce or completely avert the negative perception by oneself or others (Brennan and Binney, 2010; Friederich *et al.*, 2022).

Antecedents and outcomes of shame

Situational variables, such as social presence, may influence the experience of shame when making consumption decisions (Brennan and Binney, 2010). For example, Robertson *et al.* (2018) reveal that a situation in which others are present can produce higher shame than a situation without others. In addition, the characteristics of the others (e.g. age) are also important as the power dynamic between the others and the target person plays a crucial role (Tangney *et al.*, 1996). Specifically, perceived shame may increase with an increasingly authoritarian position of the person observing the target subject (Kochanska *et al.*, 2002). As a person's age can influence their authority, older others will evoke a stronger sense of shame. Moral lapses and socially inappropriate or unhealthy behavior (e.g. excessive consumption or smoking) evoke shame (Han *et al.*, 2014). Sustainability issues can also lead to consumer shame, if consumers attach a high value to environmental issues (Paramita *et al.*, 2024).

In view of its important role, shame is often applied in the communication policy of companies since emotion-related messages have a more convincing effect. Creating a sense of discomfort can also evoke prosocial and responsible behavior by consumers (Brennan and Binney, 2010). For this strategy to be effective, choosing the right message frame is essential, wherein gain frames emphasize the advantages of the desired behavior, loss frames focus on the disadvantages and negative consequences of a wrong behavior (Amatulli *et al.*, 2019). To stimulate emotion-based coping mechanisms, it is necessary to point out negative consequences of a certain behavior. Thus, a negative message frame can generate shame and result in prosocial behavior in consumers (Escadas *et al.*, 2020; Olsen *et al.*, 2014). In other words, it is possible to promote environmentally responsible behavior among consumers, such as buying an environmentally conscious alternative rather than a regular product, by inducing expected feelings of shame (Amatulli *et al.*, 2019).

Social frame

Amatulli *et al.* (2019) showed that choosing nonenvironmentally friendly products can trigger shame but only in the environmental sustainability context. However, from the consumer's point of view, social sustainability may be more important than the economic perspective, when making purchase decisions in the presence of others. We use norm activation theory (Schwartz, 1977) to argue that pro-environmental behavior of individuals is influenced by

situational factors such as presence of others or environmental cues due to group norms and moral obligations. Accordingly, a person's pro-environmental behavior is likely to be influenced by social norms, which can be activated by their awareness of such norms and their impact on the evaluation of one's behavior (Kabir, 2023; Khan *et al.*, 2023).

The presence of a social frame is likely to make people conclude if their own behavior could be considered immoral or socially unacceptable (Brennan and Binney, 2010; Tangney *et al.*, 1998). By contrast, in the absence of a social frame, people lack a possible object of comparison for their own thoughts and actions, which makes such an evaluation and self-reflection more difficult. Thus, we argue that providing a social frame of reference that shows the negative consequences of unsustainable actions would lead to more shame than in situations without this information. The literature also shows that shame plays a contributing factor in norm activation and pro-environmental behavior. For example, individuals who engage in nonenvironment friendly behavior and subsequently experience social shame are more likely to choose pro-environmentally friendly behavior in the future (Gurova, 2024; Paramita *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, we hypothesize as follows:

H1a. Expected shame is higher with (vs without) a social frame of reference.

Human vs animal frame

From a socio-ecological perspective, not only humans but animals are also to be considered in the construction of the social environment and this distinction could be used in deciding the content of the social frame. The basic theme of social sustainability comprises several key components, including social justice, which covers ethical treatment of people and animals (Quesada Baena *et al.*, 2024). A recent survey by German Donations Council with GfK shows that the volume of donations for humanitarian purposes at 76.4% is significantly higher than for animal welfare at only 7.4% (GfK and Deutscher Spendenrat e.V., 2023). Thus, we expect that a social frame of reference invoking human (e.g. workers) rights would lead to higher shame than one focused on animal rights, as follows:

H1b. Expected shame is higher for a social frame of reference with worker (vs animal) protection theme.

Product type

Product type has a significant influence on their ability to generate different affective states (Kivetz and Zheng, 2017; Liu and Chou, 2019). For example, hedonic products are generally considered more experiential and associated with emotional engagement, whereas utilitarian products are primarily seen as satisfying basic needs and thus, more influenced by rational rather than emotional factors. According to the theory of hedonic adaptation, hedonic products trigger emotions following hedonic adaptation, people adapt quite quickly to positive experiences, as can happen through the purchase of hedonic products (Kahneman and Thaler, 2006). However, people may also receive less pleasure from purchasing these products over time because as become accustomed to them and return to some sort of baseline of (often positive) emotion (Mahasuweerachai *et al.*, 2023).

Hedonic products appeal to sensory stimuli and trigger emotions; hence, these are used as a kind of escape from the sensory adaptation. Accordingly, consumers attach a higher value to hedonic (vs utilitarian) products, which in turn may lead to urge for more hedonic products to attain the state of stronger positive emotions. This is seen as consumer culture and an unaccepted social norm by some consumers, which could lead to shame especially among younger people (Singh *et al.*, 2022). Based on the differences in the impact of these two product types reported in past research (Amatulli *et al.*, 2019), we hypothesize that buying hedonic products would not be seen as a desirable social norm and thus lead to greater shame, compared to the purchase of utilitarian products, as follows:

H2. Expected shame is higher when buying hedonic (vs utilitarian) products.

Social presence

According to the theory of social inhibition (Guerin, 1989), presence of others can make people behave in line with the social norms, including both verbal and nonverbal actions. Although presence of others is not a prerequisite for the emergence of shame, it can be an important determinant because the perceived judgment by others is strongly related to negative judgment of one's own behavior (Brennan and Binney, 2010; Tangney *et al.*, 1996). Robertson *et al.* (2018) also show that in a situation where others are present, higher shame is generated than without the presence of others. Therefore, we expect an amplification of perceived shame in the presence of others, as follows:

H3a. Expected shame is higher in the presence (vs absence) of others.

Age groups

If others are present, the power dynamic between the observed and the observer plays a relevant role, which may be triggered by a difference in age, as older people may be perceived to wield more power than younger ones (Kochanska *et al.*, 2002). Prior research suggests a similar impact of the influence of age on shame with the feeling of shame being strongest toward older others (Kaplenko *et al.*, 2018). Comparing younger others with that of similar age, the affected person may perceive to be in a higher position and thus expect to be treated as a person of respect (Patel *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we posit that perceived shame would be higher in the presence of others who are older or similar age:

H3b. Expected shame is higher in the presence of older (vs similar age) others.

H3c. Expected shame is higher in the presence of older (vs younger) others.

H3d. Expected shame is higher in the presence of similar age (vs younger) others.

Purchase intention

Shame triggers an avoidance reaction in those affected, with the shamed person withdrawing from the situation or trying to avert or reduce the shame (Amatulli *et al.*, 2019) as people choose an alternative associated with lesser negative emotions (Tangney *et al.*, 1996). Thus, the expectation of a feeling of shame can influence the purchase intention of consumers and induce responsible and sustainable behavior. Accordingly, we hypothesize that in a decision situation between sustainable and unsustainable products, people would prefer sustainable product alternative if shame is expected in the case of an unsustainable choice, as follows:

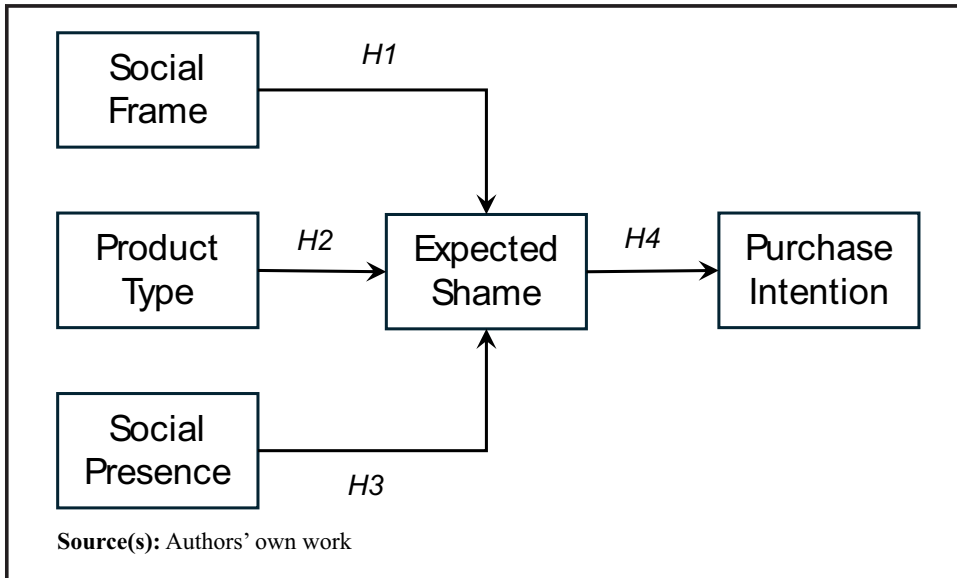
H4. Expected shame has a positive effect on the consumers' intention to purchase the socially sustainable product alternative.

Figure 1 shows our conceptual model with all the hypotheses.

Methodology

Research design

We used an online experiment with a 3 × 2 between-subjects design to manipulate social frame (workers vs animal rights and a control group) and product category (hedonic vs utilitarian) based on similar approach used in recent research on young consumers' sustainable behaviors (e.g., Quesada Baena *et al.*, 2024). Specifically, to test hypotheses *H1a-b* and *H2*, we divided our sample into six groups (Table 1), for comparison between hedonic (H) and utilitarian (U) products, and across the social frames of reference [employee protection (A), animal welfare (T) and control group (C)].

Figure 1 Conceptual model**Table 1** Classification of the experimental groups

Product type	Experimental group 1 (E_A)	Experimental group 2 (E_T)	Control group (C)	Σ
Hedonic products (H)	E_{AH} (40)	E_{TH} (40)	C_H (40)	120
Utilitarian products (U)	E_{AU} (40)	E_{TU} (40)	C_U (40)	120
Σ	80	80	80	240

Source(s): Authors' own work

Sample selection

As young consumers are the buyers of the future, they represent a particularly useful consumer segment for marketing companies (Chaturvedi *et al.*, 2020; Khan *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, this study focused on German young consumers under the age of 30 (i.e. Gen Y and Z consumers) using snowballing approach on a popular social media apps to collect our data. Specifically, we posted a link to our questionnaire on Facebook to recruit participants for our study and asked them to recommend our study to others who matched our target profile. As recommended by Hair *et al.* (2018), the sample size should be more than 10 times the number of items in the questionnaire. As we had 20 items in our questionnaire, a sample size of 200 would have been appropriate for our study. However, using a more conservative approach, we collected data from 409 participants and after removing those with incomplete questionnaires and incorrect responses to attention check questions, we achieved a final sample of 252 participants with 121 (48.02%) female and 131 (51.98%) males; 170 (67.46%) part-time and 82 (32.54%) full-time employed (Table 2). All the participants were under 30 years old with a high average (5.30) perceived relevance of sustainability issues score and a low average expected shame scores (3.28), which shows that this sample was suitable to test all the hypothesized relationships included in our conceptual model.

Table 2 Number of participants per survey group

Type	E_A	E_T	C	Σ
H	54	41	41	136
U	37	49	30	116
Σ	91	90	71	252

Source(s): Authors' own work

Task and procedure

We used a structured online questionnaire with six versions of an imaginary scenario to collect data (Appendix). All the participants were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental groups and briefly introduced to the relevant scenario, which asked them to imagine that they would buy either a hedonic (microwave popcorn) or utilitarian (toothpaste) product, with two identical product alternatives of the product randomly assigned to them. There were no differences in content, design and price of the product variants. As a distinction between the two product alternatives, only the sustainability seal of the imaginary "Social Justice Initiative" was shown on one of the two products. For the control groups CU and CH, the scenario, without further information about the seal, ended at this point.

The experimental groups were informed about the initiative's seal. As shame can be generated most effectively through negative communication, the negative consequences of choosing the unsustainable product alternative were also pointed out along with the goals of the initiative. This information was conveyed by a salesperson on site and placed in a social frame of reference with a focus on workers' rights (EAU and EAH) or animal rights (ETU and ETH) based on recent studies (e.g. Quesada Baena *et al.*, 2024; Sanchez-Chaparro *et al.*, 2024). The scenario was followed by a question to check the attention of the participants while reading the scenario. After the question about the expected shame when buying the unsustainable product alternative without the presence of others, the intention to buy and the expected shame with the presence of others and depending on the age of others were asked.

Shame construct was operationalized in the questionnaire as expected shame as actual shame may be difficult to induce using a fictional scenario. Therefore, perceived shame was measured directly in the present study using an item-specific six-point scale ("1 = I would not feel ashamed at all" to "6 = I would feel very ashamed"). Shamefulness, due to its close relationship to shame, was also measured ("1 = I am not a shameful person" to "6 = I am a very shameful person"). Purchase intention was measured as the probability of purchasing the sustainable product alternative ("1 = Very unlikely" to "6 = Very likely").

Data analysis and results

Social frames of reference and expected shaming intensity

Table 3 shows the results of all the tests of our hypotheses. *H1a* was supported with a significant difference ($t = 6.114$, $p < 0.001$) in the mean values of expected shame without the presence of others for the control group ($m = 3.05$, $n = 71$) with the experimental groups ($m = 1.83$, $n = 181$) using independent samples *t*-test. We also found no significant difference in sustainability relevance between these groups ($t = 0.588$, $p > 0.557$) and a significant difference in shamefulness ($t = 2.495$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, expected shame influenced their level of expected shame without social presence, as confirmed by a regression analysis with shamefulness ($b = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$) as a significant predictor. However, with a relatively low coefficient of determination R^2 (0.046), this was not a strong influence. *H1b* was not supported with no significant difference ($t = -0.149$, $p > 0.882$) in the mean values of expected shame without social presence between the workers ($m = 3.03$, $n = 91$) and animals ($m = 3.07$,

Table 3 Results of hypotheses tests

H#	Independent variable	Dependent variable	Statistical test	Results
H1a	Provision of a social frame (nominal)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	T-test for independent samples	$p = 0.000$, $t = 6.114$, $SD = 0.175$, $MD = 1.219$, interval [0.874; 1.564]
	Shamefulness (metric)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	Simple linear regression analysis	$p = 0.001$, $y = 1.843 + 0.263x$, $p_{b0} = 0.000$, $p_{b1} = 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.046$
H1b	Topic of social frame of reference (nominal)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	T-test for independent samples	$p = 0.882$, $t = -0.148$, $SD = 0.227$, $MD = -0.034$, interval [-0.482; 0.415]
H1	Provision of a social frame (nominal)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	ANOVA	C vs E _A : $p = 0.000$; C vs E _T : $p = 0.000$; E _A vs E _T : $p = 0.986$
H2	Product type (nominal)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	T-test for independent samples	$p = 0.679$, $t = -0.414$, $SD = 0.195$, $MD = -0.081$, interval [-0.465; 0.304]
	Social frame and product type (metric)	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	ANOVA	$p = 0.117$, $F = 2.168$, no significant interaction
H3a	Social presence (nominal)	Expected shame (metric)	T-test for dependent samples	$p = 0.000$, $t = -9.432$, $SD = 1.236$, $MD = -0.734$, interval [-0.887; -0.581]
H3	Age group of the others (ordinal)	Expected shame (metric)	ANOVA with repeated measurement	$p = 0.000$, $F = 11.392$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.043$
				H3b: older vs similar age: $p = 0.017$, $SD = 0.074$, $MD = -0.206$, interval [-0.384; -0.028]
				H3c: older vs similar age: $p = 0.153$, $SD = 0.085$, $MD = 0.167$, interval [-0.038; 0.372]
				H3d: similar age vs younger: $p = 0.000$, $SD = 0.076$, $MD = 0.373$, interval [0.191; 0.555]
H4	Expected shame without social presence (metric)	Purchase intention (metric)	Contingency analysis	$p = 0.000$, $\chi^2 = 70.448$, Pearson-R = 0.334, CC = 0.467, Cramer's V = 0.236
	Perceived relevance of sustainability (metric)	Purchase intention (metric)	Regression analysis	$p = 0.000$, $y = 3.855 + 0.315x$, $p_{b0} = 0.000$, $p_{b1} = 0.000$, $R^2 = 0.111$
			Regression analysis	$p = 0.000$, $y = 2.602 + 0.27x_1 + 0.258x_2$, $p_{b0} = 0.000$, $p_{b1} = 0.000$, $p_{b2} = 0.004$, $R^2 = 0.140$

Source(s): Authors' own work

$n = 90$) rights groups, using independent samples t -test. We did find significant differences ($p < 0.001$) for the two treatment groups (workers and animals) with the control group, using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). We also found significant pair-wise differences ($p < 0.001$) for the two treatment groups with the control group but no significant difference ($p > 0.988$) between the two treatment groups.

Influence of product type on the expected shame intensity

H2 was also not supported with no significant difference ($t = -0.414$, $p > 0.679$) in the mean values of expected shame without the presence of others between hedonic ($m = 2.67$, $n = 136$) and utilitarian ($m = 2.75$, $n = 116$) product types using independent samples t -test. Thus, the product type did not influence the expected shame. To explore this further, we tested the interaction between "product type and "frame of reference" on expected shame without social presence using a multifactorial analysis of variance (ANOVA). We found a nonsignificant ($p > 0.117$) interaction (METU = 3.31 vs METH = 2.78) and (MEAH = 3.13 vs MEAU = 2.89). Figure 2 shows these results using profile diagrams of the variables.

Influence of others on the expected shame intensity

H3a was supported with a significant difference between the expected shame with and without social presence ($t = -9.432$, $p < 0.00$), which means that the presence of others increased

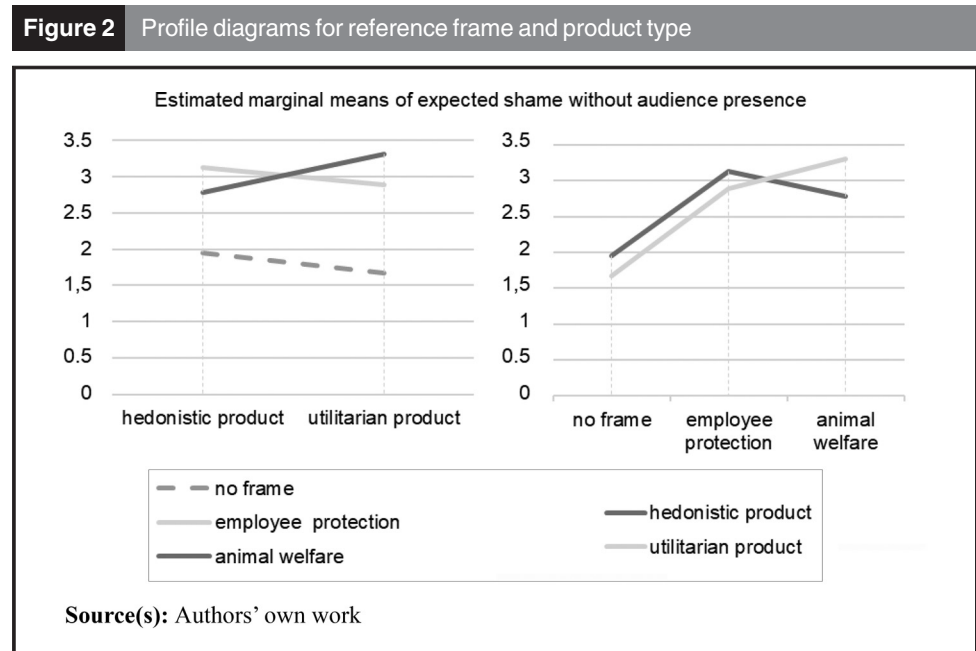
expected shame in the context of product choice. We also found a highly significant overall difference ($F = 11.392, p < 0.000$) in the expected shame among the age groups in the population. However, a pairwise comparison shows a significant difference between expected shame toward older others and others of similar age ($m = -0.206, p < 0.017$) in the opposite direction to $H3a$, which means that expected shame was higher for the others with similar age as the participant than older others. $H3c$ is also not supported with no significant difference in the expected shame ($m = 0.167, p > 0.153$) between the older and younger others. Finally, $H3d$ is supported with a significant difference ($p < 0.001$) in expected shame between similar age and younger others. For this pairwise comparison, the result was highly significant ($p = 0.000$).

Influence of the expected feeling of shame on purchase intention

We tested $H4$ about the association between the likelihood of purchasing the sustainable product and expected shame, independent of social presence, we first performed a contingency analysis to test the direction of the possible effect using a chi-square test. We found a positive relationship between the two variables with a significant Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r = 0.334, p < 0.001$) and a high contingency coefficient ($CC = 0.467, p < 0.001$). We also found a significant maximum possible effect size (Cramer's $V = 0.236, p < 0.001$) showing a small to medium effect. Finally, a regression analysis shows a positive impact ($b = 0.315, p < 0.001$) of expected shame on the probability of choosing the sustainable product alternative. Thus, $H4$ is supported. Finally, a multiple linear regression analysis of the variables "expected shame without social presence" and "sustainability relevance" on purchase intention shows a small increase (2.9%) in the coefficient of determination with the addition of the perceived sustainability. Thus, expected shame appears to be a more important driver of purchase intentions toward sustainable products.

Discussion and implications

The three pillars (environmental, economic and social) of sustainability require consumers to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle (Kumar, 2018). Moreover, social sustainability is seen as a prerequisite and compensator for the other two dimensions (Boyer *et al.*, 2016), it seems especially essential to promote this subaspect. In this context, one of the



mechanisms that can be used by companies is the use of consumers' emotions to achieve a desired – in this case socially sustainable – behavior. In particular, recent research shows the use of shame in the context of social framing as a promising avenue but there is hardly any research exploring the impact of social framing on consumer decision-making.

We address the above research gap in this paper and our results support the assumption that expected shame increases the purchase intention of sustainable product alternatives. Specifically, we explore three factors triggering the sense of shame, including (a) social reference frame, (b) product type and (c) presence of others. Although we found that expected shame is increased by the presence of others, we did not find any significant differences based on the two social frames (workers vs animal rights) and product types (hedonic vs utilitarian). We believe that the Gen Y and Z participants may not distinguish between the two social frames (workers vs animals) due to their generally higher levels of sustainability-related awareness and consciousness (Ewe and Tjiptono, 2023; Ling *et al.*, 2024).

Similarly, they may not have perceived much difference in terms of key attributes (e.g., value, usefulness or reliability) between the two product alternatives within the hedonic and utilitarian product categories. One reason for this result could be that at the time of product selection within the experiment, subjects had compared product options regardless of product type. The relationship between product attributes and communicated content may also lead to nonsignificant results as incongruent information can influence consumer attitudes and enhance persuasiveness of communication. Type of communication within the scenario may have also caused a convergence of product types. While older adults prefer affective communication content regardless of the type of product, younger adults may find affective content beneficial only in the case of hedonic products and more rational communication in the case of utilitarian products. Finally, our choice of microwave popcorn as a hedonic product may not have been seen being much different from our choice of toothpaste as a utilitarian product, which may have also led to nonsignificant differences between these two.

We found that the presence of others increased the expected shame in choosing an unsustainable product at the moment of the purchase decision, presumably due to the fact that besides the assessment of one's own behavior, condemnation by the observing person was perceived. Thus, perceived judgment by the others increased the shame with the perceived relevance of this person's opinion of the target's own behavior. Previously, it has been assumed that as authority increases, and thus as the age of the observer increases, the perceived importance of that observer's opinion increases. However, the present result suggests that the opinion of persons of similar age is valued more highly than that of older persons. Due to the influence on a person based on the fear of social exclusion by peers, it is possible that shame in the case of behavior perceived as socially undesirable is greater in the case of observers of similar age than toward older people and that the relevance of the authority of the others is weighted less strongly in comparison.

We also did not find any significant differences based on the age of the others for similar age or older than the participants, which may be due to the increased relevance of the opinion of persons of similar age explained, which could have reduced the relevance of the opinion of older, more authoritative persons, which could have led to a convergence of the expected shame toward older and younger persons in a direct comparison due to the power dynamic between the observer and the observed object. We also found a positive impact of expected shame on purchase intentions toward a sustainable product, which echoes past results that a sense of shame can induce prosocial behavior and positive behavioral change.

In other words, consumers may cope with the negative self-perception by taking action that may reduce their sense of shame, such as choosing the sustainable product alternative

([Jhamb et al., 2023](#)). Thus, purchase intention cannot only increase in the case of ecological products, as [Amatulli et al. \(2019\)](#) have demonstrated, but responsible behavior can also be forced by inducing shame in the context of social sustainability. Finally, shame contributed more strongly to the choice of the sustainable product alternative than the perceived relevance of sustainability issues. The reason for this could be that aspects of social sustainability have a lower priority than criteria such as price or quality, for example when buying food ([Nilssen et al., 2019](#)). However, the perception of other people's opinions about one's own behavior may have a greater effect in this context. Therefore, shame can influence the purchase decision to a greater extent than the attitude toward sustainability itself.

Theoretical contributions

Building on the approach of [Amatulli et al. \(2019\)](#), we use norm activation theory ([Schwartz, 1977](#)) to show that the social sustainability can trigger expected shame through framing, thus leading to environment-friendly behavior in product choice. According to norm activation theory, a person's behavior, especially when it comes to pro-environmental behavior, is influenced by personal norms, which can be activated by awareness and evaluations ([Kabir, 2023](#)). In this context, we could clearly show that expected shame increases the probability of choosing sustainable product alternatives. Again, as shown in prior studies (e.g. [Amatulli et al., 2019](#); [Brennan and Binney, 2010](#); [Han et al., 2014](#)), shame leads to pro-social behavior and results in a positive behavior change, which underlies a coping mechanism in shame. This behavior is generated because shame in this context has an endogenous effect, and the person affected is still stuck in the shame-inducing situation at the time of decision making and accordingly the subject is motivated to escape the situation. We extend [Amatulli et al. \(2019\)](#) to show the connection between shame and purchase intention not only in the case of ecological products, but also of social sustainability. The result is consistent with prior studies ([Chamberlin and Boks, 2018](#)), which shows that emotions are having a strong influence on social marketing and purchase behavior and the like.

We also show that the theory of social inhibition also applies in the context of socially sustainable product choice and that the presence of others can trigger shame. However, contrary to our expectations, social inhibition is not concretely linked to a power dynamic in our study. We assumed that more shame would be triggered when the corresponding observing others are older, as higher authoritarian status increases shame ([Kaplenko et al., 2018](#); [Kochanska et al., 2002](#)). However, our results only show significant results for this relationship when the others are of similar age. Thus, according to our results, this authority aspect, which increases the feeling of shame, seems to be context-dependent and does not apply to a young target group and the choice of sustainable product alternatives. Rather, it seems that peer pressure may play a crucial factor in this context.

[Brennan and Binney \(2010\)](#) show that perceived shame increases with increasing proximity between the others and the person concerned. It is seen that the younger generation in particular feels a sense of cohesion that transcends authority when it comes to the topic of sustainability, as reflected in their active participation. Through intimacy or belonging, the choice of a nonenvironmentally friendly product could be perceived as contrary to the social norm of the group, which is why social framing in combination with proximity (in terms of age) to the others evokes shame and thus subordinates the mechanism of power dynamics.

With regard to the social frames, we tested two framing topics against each other in the course of designing them with a view to the basic theme of social justice, as this constitutes one of the four key components of social sustainability. One framing addressed worker protection, whereas the second frame focused on animal welfare, since social justice also extends to the ethical treatment of animals ([Quesada Baena et al., 2024](#)). However, we did not find a significant difference in the mode of action of the selected frames. Consequently,

it seems irrelevant if the focus of social justice is on humans or animals, in line with recent work on ethical consumption by young consumers (Djafarova and Fouts, 2022).

We also did not find any significant difference in the expected shame when buying hedonic and utilitarian products. The initially suspected hedonic adaptation with the consequence of a perceived overconsumption of hedonic products, which opposes social norms when buying hedonic products, does not seem to apply here. Hedonic attributes are generally associated with emotions, while utilitarian attributes are associated with benefits. In the experiment, both product types were presented in a version with and without a sustainability seal. However, it is precisely this seal with reference to social justice that can appeal more strongly to emotions and thus to hedonic characteristics. Consequently, in the case of the utilitarian product variant with a seal, there is incongruent information.

In this context, Klein and Melnyk (2016) find that for utilitarian products, consumers' information processing is enhanced by presenting incongruent information, which may also improve persuasion and brand attitudes. However, for hedonic products, this effect does not occur regardless of whether the information is congruent or incongruent (Klein and Melnyk, 2016). Consequently, the incongruent information for the utilitarian product in the scenario may have increased information processing and consequently increased expected shame when purchasing the unsustainable product alternative, but not for the hedonic product. The end result is that the impact of expected shame in the presence of others may converge for both product types. This imbalance of incongruent and congruent informational positions for utilitarian and hedonic products may overcome hedonic adaptation and social norms.

Managerial implications

For practitioners, especially marketers, our results indicate some useful implications. Expected shame can ultimately influence the purchase intention of socially sustainable products, as actual shame can be averted by choosing the sustainable alternative. Thus, shame can induce responsible and socially sustainable behavior. Expected shame, triggered by deliberate communication, can thus increase the likelihood of purchasing socially sustainable products. These results make expected shame a relevant aspect of social marketing. The research shows that shame can be triggered in the context of social sustainability by means of negatively emphasized message frames, as Amatulli *et al.* (2019) have already demonstrated for environmentally sustainable products. Communicating the adverse consequences of choosing a nonsustainable product alternative may lead to a negative self-perception by the affected person. For this reason, it is possible to trigger expected shame in consumers for choosing a nonsustainable product alternative by providing a social frame of reference, even if two product variants differ solely according to this characteristic.

Companies that follow the three-pillar model of sustainability can generate shame through framing, specifically social framing. Accordingly, communication at the appeal level must be adapted by the company. Regarding the framing in the concrete, it seems irrelevant what the specific context is, as long as it is a frame of social justice. We tested human rights against animal welfare here and did not get significantly different results. As long as the frame is within the topic area, companies seem to be able to use the frame flexibly in terms of content and in a way that suits the product. As we could also show a person's self-assessment is closely related to the perceived assessments of others, which was also evident from the correlation of expected shame with and without social presence, expected shame increased in the presence of others. This result can be significant, for example, for companies that sell their products in the retail sector since many people usually shop there at the same time and thus others are usually present. The presence of other people at the consumer's decision-making or sales point should be encouraged or reinforced

accordingly. If there are no other consumers on site, employees could also serve as the others.

Finally, as expected, the expected shame is higher if the others are of similar age. For sellers of socially sustainable products, this could mean offering the products in stores close to a center for the target group. If the target group are young consumers, it would be useful to select stores in shopping areas where young consumers spend time together, to increase the probability that the target group will meet others of similar age at the point of sale. The above statements do not only apply to hedonic products, but also to utilitarian ones so the results are applicable to companies with broad product ranges.

Limitations and future research

This paper has a few limitations that future research may address. First, we studied young German consumers in this study, hence future studies may address this limitation by testing our model with young consumers from other parts of the world with diverse cultural and socio-economic conditions. Second, due to the specific scenarios used in this study, its results may only apply to the sale of products at the point of sale and purchase situations in which the consumer has two identical products at his disposal, which only differ according to a sustainability label. Future research may use scenarios with other products and purchase situations to test the generalizability of our results. Third, future studies may analyze the effect of shame with regard to the third pillar, economic sustainability, in addition to the other two pillars. Fourth, other factors that may drive purchase intentions, such as the intimacy between the others and affected person, could also be included. Finally, future studies could investigate the emergence of feelings of shame and the influence of the others (e.g. friends) and the effectiveness of the social frame of reference on online purchases.

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Appendix. Scenarios

You are in the supermarket where you usually shop. There is only one product left on your shopping list: [for EAH, ETH and CH] microwave popcorn, since you want to have a cozy movie night alone [or for EAU, ETU and CU] toothpaste for yourself. On the shelf, one product particularly appeals to you, but there are two variants of it that don't seem to differ in terms of content, design, and price. On one of the two product variants, however, you find a seal with the words "Social Justice Initiative". [End for CH and CU groups]

Since you don't know what the label means, you ask a vendor about it and find out the background of the seal. He seems to be very well informed and gives you the following information. [Continue for other groups]

[EAH and EAU groups]: "The goal of the initiative is to improve working conditions and educational opportunities worldwide. Companies that carry this seal not only ensure compliance with minimum standards, fair pay, health protection and a ban on child labour in the factory itself, but throughout the supply chain, similar to Fairtrade products. They promote the establishment and maintenance of global social justice. Lack of social justice leads not only to mass poverty and psychosocial and health consequences, but also to poverty- or wealth-related global environmental destruction. Thus, a disregard for socially sustainable aspects makes the earth and its humanity a place where future generations cannot live. Not supporting initiatives such as the Social Justice Initiative thus means participating in the destruction of society and the environment. So, you should think carefully about what product you buy". [End]

[ETH and ETU groups]: "Social justice should not only refer to humans, but also to animals. That is why this initiative acts against factory farming and animal testing. Companies that bear this seal not only ensure compliance with minimum standards, but also support the preservation of biodiversity and promote the establishment and maintenance of global social justice for animals. Lack of social justice for animals leads, for example, to species extinction and large amounts of greenhouse gases, which have strong negative consequences on our environment. Thus, a disregard for socially sustainable aspects makes the Earth and its humanity a place where future generations cannot live. Not supporting initiatives like the Social Justice Initiative thus means participating in the destruction of society and the environment as well as the disregard of animal rights. So, you should think carefully about what product you buy". [End]

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