

They did what? Why the unexpected sustainable behaviours of others lead to positive outcomes

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Abstract

In this paper, we study the effect of expectancy violations on the observer's behavior in the context of sustainable consumption decisions. In four experiments we show that observing others behaving unexpectedly can positively impact the observer's sustainable behaviors compared to when the behavior is expected. We find that this is because observing unexpected behavior creates uncertainty around the focal behavior, which, in turn, makes individuals more susceptible to normative influence. Accordingly, in contexts where behavioral uncertainty is low, i.e., when a behavior is normative already, we find that the effect is attenuated. Our research extends findings on how and why expectancy violations can positively affect the behavior of the observer. It also challenges the traditional emphasis on congruency in marketing by showing that unexpectedness can be a powerful persuasion tool for promoting sustainable behaviors through public figures.

Keywords: *expectancy violations, social norms, sustainable behavior change*

Track: *Consumer Behavior*