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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A good reason to buy: Justification drives the effect of advertising frames on impulsive socially responsible buying

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Abstract

Today, consumers expect companies to be socially responsible. However, the literature is undecided about the effects of communicating one's corporate social responsibility activities to consumers. This raises the question of how sustainability-driven companies can best advertise their products to stimulate ethical consumption: using self-benefit frames, where the main beneficiary is the consumer, or using other-benefit frames, where the main beneficiary is a third party. Using three experiments, this study examines the effect of other-benefit (vs. self-benefit) advertising frames on consumers' impulse purchases from sustainability-driven companies. Increasing impulse purchases can help such companies to strengthen their competitive positions. Additionally, it is studied to what extent two types of justification (moral versus deservingness) explain the proposed effect of advertising frames. The results show that only other-benefit frames affect impulse buying behavior, both directly, as mediated by moral justification. This study's insights may help sustainability-driven companies to decide on their advertising strategies by providing evidence that other-benefit-framed advertisements are more effective in enhancing impulse purchases than self-benefit-framed advertisements.

KEYWORDS

advertising frames, corporate social responsibility, impulsive purchase behavior, justification, other-benefit, self-benefit, sustainability

1 | INTRODUCTION

> "If your brand isn't helping your consumers improve their environmental and social footprint, then you're in danger of disappointing 88% of them" (Townsend, 2018).

Today, an increasing number of consumers expect companies to be socially responsible. As a response, the number of companies that have started corporate social responsibility initiatives have increased massively (Coleman et al., 2020; Taylor, 2018). Corporate social responsibility initiatives can be described as a company's contribution to society and/or environment, instead of harming them, while increasing its revenues (see Green & Peloza, 2011; Nan & Heo, 2007). Therefore, such initiatives are part of the more comprehensive concept of sustainability management, which is defined as "the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of both environmental and socioeconomic sustainability-related decisions and actions" (Starik & Kanashiro, 2013; p. 12).

Although consumers are inclined to value companies' sustainability-related initiatives (Casalegno et al., 2022; Coleman et al., 2020; Diehl et al., 2016), not all sustainability-driven companies

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are successful. The overall market share of ethical products is relatively low (d'Astous & Legendre, 2009), few consumers want to learn about a product's ethical qualities (Zane, Irwin, & Reczek, 2016), and companies' publicity and advertisements about their sustainability initiatives are often perceived as insincere, ethically doubtful, or even as a manipulative trick to sell over-priced products (Barone et al., 2000; d'Astous et al., 2020). Especially, people with an individualistic mindset, who are not uncommon in countries such as the United States of America, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, can be skeptical of corporate philanthropy (Chang & Cheng, 2015). Summarily, "(…) just because we are seeing more of these [sustainability] appeals does not necessarily mean they are effective" (Taylor, 2018; p. 338). This raises the question of how sustainability-driven companies can best advertise their products to stimulate ethical consumption.

The effectiveness of advertising codepends on how messages are framed (Waymer et al., 2021). Companies embedding sustainability in their strategies have the possibility to choose between (at least) two types of advertising frames: self-benefit advertising frames, which communicate the benefits for the consumer (e.g., "These chocolates will make you happier"), versus other-benefit advertising frames, which communicate that the main beneficiary of the purchase is someone or something other than the consumer (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2021; Sattler et al., 2020), such as the social or environmental cause that the company supports (e.g., "These chocolates empower cacao farmers"). There is a growing body of literature that recognizes that the two types of advertising frames elicit various responses (e.g., Ryoo et al., 2020). However, there is no consensus on which appeal is the most effective or what mechanisms explain their effects (e.g., Jäger & Weber, 2020; Yadav, 2016).

All types of companies can use self-benefit advertisements to promote their goods. However, using other-benefit advertisements that focus on their contribution to society seems pre-eminently appropriate for sustainability-driven companies. Naturally, this is only an advantage for such companies if other-benefit frames appear to be more effective than self-benefit frames. This study specifically focuses on the aforementioned, thereby responding to the call for more research on advertising appeals in corporate social responsibility (Taylor, 2018). More specifically, this study examines the effects of other-benefit advertising frames (vs. self-benefit frames) on consumers' impulse purchase urges and behaviors. A major part of consumption behavior entails impulse purchases (Thürmer et al., 2020). For example, people from the United States spend, on average, US$ 450 monthly on products they did not plan to buy but somehow eagerly wanted in the spur of the moment (Slickdeals, 2018). Therefore, increasing impulse purchases can help sustainability-driven companies to strengthen their competitive positions (cf. Mehra et al., 2017).

Impulse buying, especially impulsively purchasing hedonic products, requires justification to feel good about the purchase (Okada, 2005; Warden et al., 2006). Both self-benefit and other-benefit frames have the potential to offer such justifications to the consumer. Therefore, we also study the extent to which justification explains the proposed effect of advertising frames on impulse buying. Moreover, insights into justification processes arguably help us to further understand advertising frame effectiveness. Justification entails finding reasons for one's actions (Park & Hill, 2018), and it can offer consolation to consumers who buy on impulse (Warden et al., 2006). We distinguish between two types of justifications in this study. First, deservingness justification, which is proposedly elicited by self-benefit frames, is defined as all types of justifications that are related to why someone might deserve to engage in impulse buying. Second, moral justification, which is proposedly elicited by other-benefit frames, is defined as the use of moral or prosocial reasons to justify ones' impulse purchases. Deservingness justification is not new to the marketing and psychology literature (e.g., Cavanaugh, 2014). However, this study is the first to examine moral justification in the context of sustainability management and advertising framing. Studying moral justification as an explanation mechanism in the effect of advertising frames on impulse buying can arguably provide further insights into how sustainability-driven companies should advertise their products.

Both academic and industry research have highlighted the importance of sustainability management (e.g., CauseGood, 2017; Chang & Cheng, 2015; Coleman et al., 2020). However, because of the inconsistent results observed in the research on the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives (e.g., Acuti et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2009), message framing (e.g., Jäger & Weber, 2020; Yadav, 2016), and the lack of research on moral justification in consumer behavior and marketing fields, it is unclear how socially responsible companies should frame their advertisements to strengthen their competitive position by enhancing consumers' impulse purchase behavior. Therefore, in this study, three experiments are conducted to examine the effect of self- versus other-benefit-framed advertisements of a sustainability-driven company on consumers' impulse purchase behavior. Furthermore, we explore the extent to which the effect of the advertising frame on impulse purchase behavior can be explained by deservingness versus moral justification. This study contributes to the literature on sustainability management, advertising framing, purchase behavior, and justification, and it offers implications for marketing practitioners and consumer psychologists.

2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS BUILDING

2.1 | Using advertising frames to solve the vice/virtue response conflict in impulse buying

Impulse purchases are, by definition, unplanned and are accompanied by a sudden, strong, and persistent urge to buy the product immediately (e.g., Rook & Hoch, 1985; Thürmer et al., 2020). Impulse buying urge, a strong predictor of impulse buying, is the state of desire felt upon encountering a certain product (Beatty & Ferrell, 1998). Such urges are not rarely evoked by advertisements, especially when they promote hedonic products (e.g., Fennis & Stroebe, 2015).

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The urge to buy an advertised product often leads to an internal conflict between vice and virtue among many consumers. On the one hand, people feel the urge to succumb to their impulses and buy the product (vice). On the other hand, people want to stick to their long-term (ethical) goals, such as saving, eating healthy, or consuming less to contribute to a better world, and therefore, they do not want to buy the advertised product (virtue; de Witt Huberts et al., 2014). The vice/virtue response conflict can also be described as a struggle between two contradictions: the pleasure principle, whereby consumers choose for immediate gratification, and the reality principle, whereby consumers choose for long-term goals, and, therefore, consider the consequences of their behavior (Freud, 1920/1956; Rook & Hoch, 1985). Correspondingly, various research works suggest that impulse buying is the outcome of a conflict between desire (vice) and reflection on long-term consequences (virtue), where the vice option wins (e.g., Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Lades, 2014; also see Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2018).

Marketers and advertising practitioners address this vice/virtue response conflict by providing consumers with reasons, communicated through a self-benefit or other-benefit advertising frame, that should justify the vice choice and thereby the purchase. According to Oxford Languages (n.d.), justification is "the action of showing something to be right or reasonable." Comparable to this definition is that of Park and Hill (2018). They state that justification involves finding reasons for one's actions. Marketers and advertisers respond to this knowledge by, for example, adding health claims to unhealthy indulgent foods, hoping that such claims offer justifications for indulgence. Accordingly, research shows that right health claims (e.g., "low fat") can decrease internal goal conflict and increase indulgent behavior (Belei et al., 2012).

People need to justify their urges and behaviors because the discrepancy between behavior(al urges) and beliefs or long-term goals can cause unpleasant psychological feelings of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; also see Kivetz & Zheng, 2006; Londoño & Ruiz de Maya, 2022) or, when behavior and ethical standards do not align, feelings of ethical dissonance (Kim et al., 2021). A study on ethical dissonance and the effects of advertising frames showed that people who realized that they performed unethical behavior attempted to alleviate their feelings of dissonance by adopting other-unrelated ethical behaviors after being exposed to other-benefit messages (Kim et al., 2021). This reinforces the idea that people want to limit feelings of dissonance as much as possible and that advertising frames can help people to achieve that goal. However, the present research will study the extent to which advertising frames can also help consumers to *justify* their behavior(al urge) that otherwise might have caused feelings of cognitive or ethical dissonance.

We argue that feelings of dissonance will diminish when consumers either act in line with their (ethical) beliefs and goals and thus resist the conflicting urge to buy hedonic products on impulse (e.g., the consumer does not buy the indulgent food because of its goal to be healthier or its belief that irresponsible consumption pollutes the world), or when they give in to their urges but come up with a justified reason why this particular situation allows them to indulge (e.g., the consumer buys the indulgent food because this specific candy bar only contains 0.5% fat or because the brand plants trees to compensate their CO_2 emissions). The easier it is for consumers to justify indulgent choices, the stronger their preference for those choices (Akamatsu & Fukuda, 2022). Justification can, therefore, be perceived as a coping strategy that helps consumers to feel better about their indulgent purchases (Yi & Baumgartner, 2011). Especially, consumers who buy on impulse need reassurance through justification (Warden et al., 2006).

However, no research has explicitly studied the extent to which people copy the reasons to buy, provided by a self-benefit or other-benefit advertising frame, and use them as justification to buy on impulse. In fact, there is no unambiguous answer to the question of which advertising frame (self-benefit vs. other-benefit) elicits the most positive outcomes in general. For example, some studies on green purchase behavior find stronger positive effects of self-benefit message frames over other-benefit frames (e.g., Cozzio et al., 2022; Visser et al., 2015; Yadav, 2016), while others find the opposite (e.g., Jäger & Weber, 2020; Wei et al., 2012). In addition, research on generating charitable support is not entirely unambiguous (e.g., Sattler et al., 2020). Fisher et al. (2008) claim that mainly other-benefit advertising frames enhance donating behavior. However, Jin et al. (2021) argue that other benefit frames are only effective under certain circumstances. In light of ethical consumption, Ryoo et al. (2020) found an effect of self-benefit advertisements, while, conversely, Yucel-Aybat and Hsieh (2021) only found an effect of other-benefit frames.

Thus, it can be concluded that both advertising frames potentially enhance consumers' ability to act upon their urges. Nevertheless, it remains unclear which advertising frame softens the vice/virtue response conflict the most, thereby evoking the most convincing justifications to buy the product, and which frame, therefore, is more effective in enhancing sales for sustainability-driven companies.

2.2 | Advertising frames elicit different types of justifications

We propose that advertising frames (self-benefit vs. other-benefit) evoke different types of justifications. For example, Patagonia, the outdoor clothing and gear brand, occasionally advertises its products through not only self-benefit frames ("Patagonia gives you the comfort, quality, and durability you need") but also other-benefit frames ("Protect your playground"). Arguably, the self-benefit slogan evokes a different reason to buy a Patagonia product on impulse (e.g., "I hike occasionally, so I deserve good quality clothes. Therefore, it is okay for me to buy this Patagonia product"), than the other-benefit slogan (e.g., "I agree i.e. important to protect our environment. Therefore, it is okay for me to buy this Patagonia product"). The easier it is to justify a behavior, the greater the chance that consumers give in to their (conflicting) urges (Akamatsu & Fukuda, 2022; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009).

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We distinguish between two types of justifications: deservingness justification and moral justification. Deservingness justification refers to all forms of justifications related to why someone might *deserve* to engage in hedonic impulse buying. Research shows that people are quite creative when it comes to generating reasons for why they deserve what they want. For example, they use the questionable argument of counterfactual sins, such as not eating a snack in the past (Effron et al., 2013) or prior shopping restraint (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009), as a justified reason to indulge oneself ("I did not eat a cookie yesterday, so I am allowed to eat it today"). In fact, people tend to amplify the sins they do not commit to build a stronger case for their future indulgent behavior. Effron et al. (2013) show that people exaggerate the unhealthiness of foods they do not eat and use this as a justified reason to impulsively indulge. Surprisingly, people also tend to use prior indulgent choices to justify a subsequent indulgent choice (Akamatsu & Fukuda, 2022). In addition, consumers feel they deserve indulgence, like luxury goods, when they put effort into a task, even if this task is not that demanding (Kivetz & Simonson, 2002). Moreover, they argue that they deserve to self-gift when they have accomplished something (Londoño & Ruiz de Maya, 2022; Mick & DeMoss, 1990), or feel that they are entitled to spoil themselves with hedonic products when they are in a bad mood (Taylor et al., 2014). Tezer and Sobol (2021) even show that consumers exaggerate the severity of their daily problems to justify why they deserve to indulge. Presumably, deservingness justifications for impulse buying are more often elicited by self-benefit messages than by other-benefit messages, as, by definition, self-benefit messages are more focused on "the self."

A less prominent form of justification in the consumer and advertising field is "moral justification." In psychology, moral justification is defined as the representation of an unethical deed as in the service of moral purposes (Bandura, 1999; Barsky, 2011). Correspondingly, in this study, moral justification refers to the use of moral or pro-social reasons to justify one's impulse purchases. Moral justification can be perceived as a mechanism to disengage ones (unethical) actions from moral standards (moral disengagement, see Bandura, 1999). Sharma and Paço (2021) show that consumers can use moral disengagement to justify nonsustainable choices. However, in this study we will study if sustainability claims can be used to morally justify self-indulgent behavior. Moral justification can be viewed as an appeal to higher loyalties (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Niven & Healy, 2016), as the greater good is used as an excuse for one's own behavior. As moral justification is rarely investigated within the marketing or consumer behavioral field, we will provide an example of moral justification from the social psychology literature. Hunt and Manning (1991) show that police officers, who strongly believe that a defendant is guilty, may lie in court to convince a judge to convict, and use "justice" as a moral justification for lying. In this example, the greater good is used to justify one's sinful behavior. We argue that people can also use the greater good, such as the cause that a sustainability-driven company stands for, to justify impulsive hedonic purchases. Hence, moral justifications for impulse buying are presumably more often elicited by other-benefit messages than self-benefit messages.

2.3 | Self-benefit versus other-benefit advertising frames for sustainability-driven companies

So far, we have established that sustainability-driven companies can choose between (at least) two types of advertising frames. They can try to persuade consumers to buy their products through self-benefit advertising frames, which arguably enhances deservingness justification, or through other-benefit advertising frames, which arguably enhances moral justification. Both advertising frames potentially reduce internal goal conflict and feelings of cognitive or ethical dissonance that people can experience when they feel a sudden desire to buy a hedonic product (also see Kim et al., 2021; Kubany et al., 1996). Consequently, both frames can enhance immediate purchase behavior.

However, we argue that other-benefit advertising frames, for sustainability-driven companies selling hedonic products, are more successful in attenuating consumers' internal vice/virtue response conflict than self-benefit advertising frames, resulting in a stronger effect on impulse purchase behavior of other-benefit frames. A self-benefit advertisement appeals only to the vice choice and, thus, does not address any possible positive long-term consequences of one's behavior (virtues). However, the other-benefit advertisement answers to both the vice and virtue options. It communicates the reasons why self-indulging (which is a vice option by definition, Londoño & Ruiz de Maya, 2022) is morally justified. By choosing the vice option that is promoted through an other-benefit frame, the consumer can achieve immediate gratification by buying on impulse (vice) *and* the positive long-term consequences of its behavior, namely, benefitting the cause that the sustainability-driven company supports (virtue). Therefore, we expect other-benefit frames to have a stronger effect on impulse buying. Impulse buying urge is a strong predictor of impulse buying behavior (e.g., Rook & Hoch, 1985). Hence, we measure the effect of advertising framing on both urge and behavior. Based on the preceding, we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: Other-benefit advertising frames for hedonic products from sustainability-driven companies lead to stronger impulse buying urges than self-benefit advertising frames.

H2: Other-benefit advertising frames for hedonic products from sustainability-driven companies lead to more impulse buying behaviors than self-benefit advertising frames.

A self-benefit frame, although still often used in advertising, arguably fits a more traditional marketing style. It focuses only on the consumer as a stakeholder in advertisements. However, other-benefit frames arguably fit a more contemporary marketing style. It focuses on stakeholders other than (only) the consumer, which corresponds to the increasing number of companies that embed sustainability in their strategies (Villamil et al., 2022). This also matches stakeholder theory, which postulates that a company's purpose is to generate value for all stakeholders, instead of just for the seller and the buyer (Freeman et al., 2010). Both the literature on sustainability management and stakeholder theory argue that

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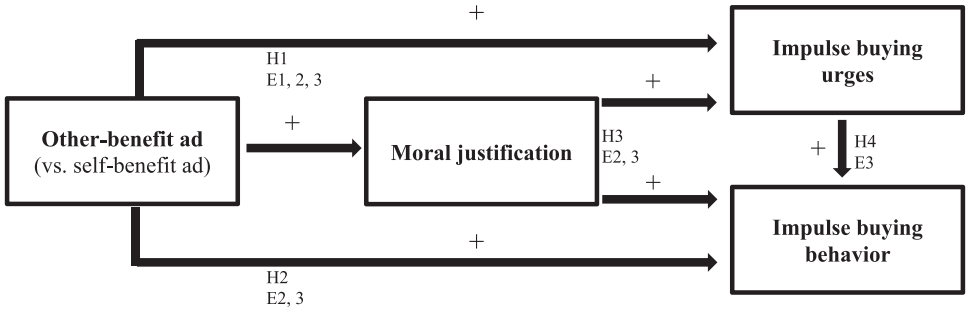

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model showing that H1 is tested in Experiments 1 to 3, H2 and H3 are tested in Experiments 2 and 3, and H4 is tested is Experiment 3.

business and ethics should not, and cannot, be separated as they are fundamentally intertwined (Hörisch et al., 2014). When companies choose to advertise through an other-benefit frame, they align their advertisements with this vision.

In other words, the other-benefit message frame fits contemporary operational management. Correspondingly, it merges the vice and virtue options. We argue that people can use an other-benefit frame to morally justify their impulse purchase, and that this, therefore, mediates the proposed effect of other-benefit advertisements (vs. self-benefit advertisements) on impulse buying. The other-benefit frame arguably liberates people to act on their impulses since people receive information through the advertisement that allows them to morally justify the purchase. By contrast, self-benefit advertisements could evoke deservingness justification. However, this type of justification only builds a case on why one should choose the vice option. It does not appeal to the virtue option, resulting in a continuing existing vice/virtue conflict. When the vice and virtue option are both addressed in one frame, as with the other-benefit frame, it can arguably (close to) solve the conflict through moral justification, resulting in impulse buying behavior.

H3: Moral justification mediates the effect of advertising frames on impulse buying urges and behaviors.

Additionally, to present a complete conceptual model, we assess the previously observed relationship between impulse buying urges and impulse buying behaviors (e.g., Badgaiyan & Verma, 2015).

H4: Impulse buying urges lead to impulse buying behaviors.

3 | METHOD AND RESULTS

Three experiments were conducted to test the hypotheses. All the three studies were preregistered at Open Science Framework[1]. In Experiment 1, we studied the effect of advertising framing on impulse buying urges (H1), and exploratively examined the role of justification in this proposed effect. In Experiment 2, we studied the effect of advertising framing on both impulse buying urge (H1) and impulse buying behavior (H2). Additionally, we tested the mediating role of justification in the proposed effects (H3). Experiment 3 is a replication of Experiment 2, wherein we also tested the effect of impulse buying urge on impulse buying behavior (H4)[2]. See Figure 1 for an overarching framework.

3.1 | Experiment 1

3.1.1 | Design and participants

Experiment 1 was a large field experiment ($N = 366$) that took place in an Amsterdam supermarket that cooperated with this study. We used a single-factor between-subjects design with "message frame" (self-benefit vs. other-benefit) as the instrumental variable (IV), "justification" as the underlying mechanism, and "impulse-buying urge" as the dependent variable (DV). The goals include 1) to examine if there is an effect of message frame on impulse buying urges (H1) and 2) to explore the extent to which people adopt the reasons to buy, provided by brands through a self-benefit or other-benefit message frame, and how justifications are used to justify impulse buying urges. The participants were passers-by of the cooperating supermarket where we collected data for 3.5 weeks. The participants were between 16 and 83 years old ($M = 40.89$, standard deviation [SD] = 16.97). The majority (55.5%) were female, 42.9% was male, and the remaining 1.6% did not identify as male or female.

3.1.2 | Stimulus material & procedure

The participants were exposed to an advertisement of a sustainability-driven company. The company sells cookies that are baked by young adults with a distance to the labor market. Cookies

[1]See https://archive.org/details/osf-registrations-yvs98-v1for preregistration part 1, https://archive.org/details/osf-registrations-7z4ne-v1 for pre-registration part 2, and https://archive.org/details/osf-registrations-6mhx4-v1 for part 3.

[2]We solely tested this hypothesis in Experiment 3 since we did not preregistrate this hypothesis for Experiment 1 and 2.

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are a hedonic product and, therefore, an interesting product to study in this paper, as it is generally harder and more necessary to justify impulsively purchasing such goods than the purchase of utilitarian goods (Londoño & Ruiz de Maya, 2022; Okada, 2005). The advertisement contained a photo of a baker lifting a tray of cookies combined with a photo of different kind of packaged cookies and the following sentence: "Our cookies are fresh, handmade, and come in a variety of flavors". To manipulate the message frame, we followed White and Peloza (2009) and implemented either two self-benefits ("Treat yourself to some extra happiness today and buy our cookies"; "You deserve it, right?") or two other-benefits ("Treat the underprivileged young adults who bake these cookies to some extra happiness today and buy our cookies"; "They deserve it, right?"). We conducted a pre-test to check whether the manipulation of the message frame succeeded. Forty-nine undergraduate students participated in a within-subject pre-test and were asked to specify, on a scale from 1 (self) to 10 (others), the extent to which they thought the advertisements focused on them versus others. The results demonstrated that the other-benefit message frame was indeed experienced as more focused on others, and the self-benefit message frame was more focused on themselves (M_{others} = 7.57, SD = 1. 71 vs. M_{self} = 3.48, SD = 2.61, p = 0.000).

The advertisement (stimulus material) was placed in the window of the supermarket that sold the cookies. Passers-by were asked by student assistants to first look at the advertisement and then complete the questionnaire. The participants' exposure to the self-benefit or other-benefit framed message depended on the day they were asked to participate in the study. The conditions were altered per day and per week to counterbalance the possible effect of "day of the week."

3.1.3 | Measurements

To obtain the first idea of the justification processes at work, we asked participants, with open-ended questions, what their thoughts and feelings were during exposure to the message. These answers were coded independently by two researchers following a coding scheme, which determined whether the reported thoughts and feelings could be categorized as a justification or not. As the intercoder reliability was very high (Kappa = 0.906, O'Connor & Joffe, 2020), we decided to follow the judgements of the first author on the few different encodings that were found after discussing the differences together (cf. O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In the coding scheme, a distinction was made between moral justification, comprising all of the answers that people could use as moral or pro-social reasons to justify their impulse purchase urges (e.g., "It is a wonderful initiative and I would like to support that," based on the definition used by Haidt, 2003; Niven & Healy, 2016; Taylor et al., 2014), and deservingness justification, encompassing all of the answers that people could use as a justification of why they deserve to impulsively buy (e.g., "I worked really hard today and feel like I deserve a treat," based on the definition used by Effron et al., 2013; Kivetz & Simonson, 2002; Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009).

Impulse buying urge was measured with three items (e.g., "I feel a strong urge to buy the cookies," explained variance = 88.38%, Cronbach's α = 0.93, M = 3.6, SD = 1.4) on a 7-point Likert scale based on the measurement used by Sultan et al. (2012); see also Moes et al. (2021).

Besides the mediator and DV, we also measured some control variables, namely, how much cravings/hunger the participants had during the study (measured with one item), their familiarity with the Dutch supermarket where the study was conducted (measured with one item), the amount of cookies that the participants ate on average (measured with one item), and the trait of general shopping impulsiveness (measured with three items: In general I find myself, during shopping, impulsive/careless/easily tempted. Cronbach's α = 0.85, Rook & Fisher, 1995). A randomization check shows that participants from both conditions do not have significantly different scores on these control variables (craving: M_{self} = 4.0, SD = 2.2 vs. M_{other} = 3.8, SD = 2.1, t = 0.94, p = 0.664; familiarity: M_{self} = 1.1, SD = 0.2 vs. M_{other} = 1.1, SD = 0.3, t = −0.49, p = 0.326; cookie eating: M_{self} = 3.8, SD = 1.8 vs. M_{other} = 3.9, SD = 1.8, t = −0.65, p = 0.688; general impulsiveness: M_{self} = 3.6, SD = 1.4 versus M_{other} = 3.7, SD = 1.5, t = −0.74, p = 0.853). Therefore, these variables were not included as covariates in further analyses.

Finally, we measured demographics (sex and age) and included some variables for exploratory reasons, such as positive and negative emotions.[3]

3.1.4 | Results

We performed a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to test the direct effect of message frame on impulse buying urges (H1). The ANOVA shows no direct effect of message frame on impulse buying urge (F (1, 364) = 0.15, p = 0.698), so Hypothesis 1 is rejected.

However, we do find an effect of message frame on justification. A χ^2 test showed that people who were exposed to the other-benefit frame more often expressed thoughts or feelings related to justifying the impulse buying of the cookies (40%) than the people who were exposed to the self-benefit frame (19%, Pearson χ^2 = 18.16, $p \leq 0.000$). It should be noted that these justifications are almost exclusively related to moral justification and rarely to deservingness justification. Among the people who were exposed to the self-benefit frame (n = 185), 18% had thoughts and/or feelings referring to moral justification, 1% had thoughts and/or feelings referring to deservingness justification. Among the people who were exposed to the other-benefit frame (n = 181), 40% had thoughts and/or feelings referring to moral justification, 0% had thoughts and/or feelings referring to deservingness justification.

[3]We do not use the explorative variables for this study paper. For a full list of these exploratory variables, please contact the corresponding author.

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Additionally, an ANOVA shows that people who have thoughts or feelings related to (mainly moral) justifications have a stronger urge to buy on impulse ($M = 4.0$, SD = 1.21) than the people who do not experience such thoughts or feelings ($M = 3.5$, SD = 1.48, F (1, 364) = 8.72, $p = 0.003$). This suggests that there may be an indirect effect of messages on impulse buying urges via justification, as hypothesized in H3.

3.1.5 | Discussion

Experiment 1 provides us with the insight that people experience thoughts similar to the statements made in the advertisement after being exposed to an other-benefit advertising frame. It seems that people are more likely to adopt reasons to buy that are beneficial for others (vs. beneficial for themselves), and that people who adopt these reasons show a stronger impulse buying urge. We did not find a direct effect of message frames on impulse buying urge in Experiment 1. A possible explanation for the absence of this direct effect could be that consumers provide socially desirable answers, as impulse buying is generally linked to various negative traits, such as immaturity, and outcomes, such as financial problems (e.g., Rook & Fisher, 1995). Perhaps only people who explicitly mentioned moral justifications for buying the cookies when openly asked about their thoughts and feelings dared to indicate that they would impulsively buy the product.

To determine whether the (socially responsible) answers given on the scale measuring impulse buying urge indeed differ from actual impulse buying behavior, we choose, in Experiment 2, to additionally measure impulse buying behavior (H2). Moreover, measuring impulse buying behavior in an actual shopping environment, as in Experiment 1, is challenging. In such cases, participants are often afterwards asked if the purchase was done impulsively (e.g., Mohan et al., 2013). This may lead to false answers, as it is likely that people defend their impulsively made choices by convincing themselves (and others) that the purchase was planned (see Moes et al., 2021). In Experiment 2, which will be a vignette-based experiment, we are able to measure actual impulse behavior without encountering this problem (see "Experiment 2," "Measurements").

As we found, in Experiment 1, a two-step indirect effect of advertising frame on justification and of justification on impulse buying urge, we have reasons to believe that justification underlies the possible effect of message frames on impulse buying. Therefore, we test for mediation in Experiment 2 (H3).

In Experiment 1, we compared self-benefit message frames with other-benefit message frames. To compare the effects of these message frames with a baseline, we added a neutral message frame to the design of Experiment 2.

3.2 | Experiment 2

3.2.1 | Design & participants

The second experiment ($N = 524$) was a vignette-based experiment in which participants were explicitly asked to imagine performing groceries in a physical supermarket (cf. Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010; Verhagen et al., 2019). The aim of Experiment 2 was to (1) examine whether there is an effect of message frame on impulse buying urges (H1) and on impulse buying behavior (H2), and (2) test whether the most commonly reported justifications, derived from the open-ended questions in Experiment 1 (cf. Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014), functions as a mediator in the effect of message frames on impulse buying (H3). Experiment 2 used a single-factor between-subjects design with "message frame" (self-benefit vs. other-benefit vs. neutral message frame) as the IV, "justification" as mediating variable, and "impulse-buying urge" and "impulse buying behavior" as the DVs. We hired a data collection bureau to recruit participants throughout the Netherlands. From the 1039 people who started this online experiment, 524 passed the two attention checks and fully completed the questionnaire. The sample was representative of the Dutch population regarding sex (50.4% identified as female, 49.4% as male, and 0.2% neither identified as male nor female), age ($M = 47.61$, SD = 16.25), and education (29% was theoretically trained, 34.5% was practically trained, 34.7% only finished high school, and 1.7% did not have a diploma).

3.2.2 | Stimulus material and procedure

In Experiment 2, the same message frames (stimulus material) as in Experiment 1 were used, except that a neutral message frame was added as the third condition. The neutral framed advertisement was identical to the other two advertisements, except that it did not contain any benefits of buying the cookies for anyone.

Experiment 2 was a vignette-based experiment; therefore, the participants were exposed to the advertisement online. They were first asked to imagine being in a physical supermarket doing groceries for dinner and seeing an advertisement at the checkout register. The participants were then randomly exposed to either the self-benefit message, other-benefit message, or neutral message. Thereafter, they completed the questionnaire.

3.2.3 | Measurements

In Experiment 2, both types of justifications—moral and deservingness—were measured using a 7-point Likert scale. Each scale consisted of two items that were derived from the most frequently cited answers to the open-ended questions in Experiment 1 (cf. Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009; Taylor et al., 2014). Moral justification was operationalized as moral or pro-social reasons that people could use to justify impulse buying and was measured with the items "I think this company is a beautiful initiative" and "I think this company is congenial" (explained variance = 91.15%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 4.3$, SD = 1.6). Deservingness justification was operationalized as reasons that people could use to justify why they deserve to buy impulsively

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and was measured with the items "I allow[4] myself to these cookies" and "I feel like I deserve these cookies" (explained variance = 91.95%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 3.4$, SD = 1.8).

Impulse buying urge was, similarly as in Experiment 1, measured with items based on the measurement used by Sultan et al. (2012, explained variance = 88.38%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$, M = 3.3, SD = 1.8).

Impulse buying behavior was measured by asking the participants to either choose to receive points for their participation in the study (which they normally also receive when participating in studies and can be exchanged for money) or choose to buy the cookies with the points they otherwise would earn. In the latter case, participants would receive cookies and no points. As Experiment 2 was vignette-based and the participants were unaware of the topic of this study before participation, we can assume that choosing the cookies over the points would be an unintended and immediate reaction to the stimulus, which corresponds to the concept of impulse behavior (Muruganantham & Bhakat, 2013).

To confirm that the effect of message framing on impulse buying is explained by justification, and thus by a reason that justifies one's impulse buying behavior (Holland et al., 2002), we added a one-item question about why people are willing to buy the cookies (ranging from 1 = only to benefit myself to 7 = only to benefit others, $M = 3.5$, SD = 1.9). We also measured two control variables: the extent to which people like cookies in general ($M = 5.3$, SD = 1.6) and the extent to which people prohibit themselves from eating cookies ($M = 4.7$, SD = 1.8). Both were evenly divided across the three conditions and were therefore not included as covariates in further analyses ($\chi^2_{liking} = 9.29$, $p = 0.678$; $\chi^2_{prohibiting} = 6.20$, $p = 0.906$. Finally, we measured demographics (sex, age, and education level).[5]

3.2.4 | Results

Similar to Experiment 1, a one-way ANOVA shows no direct effect of message frame on impulse buying urge (F (2, 521) = 1.70, $p = 0.185$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is rejected again. However, in line with the results of Experiment 1, we do find a mediation effect of moral justification (H3) when performing mediation analysis. Please note that Hayes (2017) argues that the direct effect of X on Y is not required in modern mediation analysis. Mediation analysis (with Process Model 4) shows that the message frame influences moral justification. Participants exposed to the other-benefit advertisement experienced higher levels of moral justification than participants who were exposed to the self-benefit or neutral advertisement ($M_{self} = 4$, SD = 1.56; $M_{neutral} = 4.10$, SD = 1.59; $M_{other} = 5.03$, SD = 1.55; $B = -0.567$, standard error [SE] = 0.14, 95% confidence interval [CI]: [−0.86 to −0.28]). The analysis also shows that moral justification affects impulse buying urge ($B = 0.291$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI: [0.22–0.36]). Subsequently, the results demonstrate a mediating effect of message frames on impulse buying urges through moral justification ($b = 0.65$, SE = 0.13, 95% CI: [0.41–0.91]), meaning that an other-benefit frame positively affects impulse buying urges through moral justification. Message framing does not affect impulse buying urges through deservingness justification ($b = -0.15$, SE = 0.13, 95% CI: [−0.14 to 0.40]).

Experiment 2 also reveals a direct positive effect of message frame on impulsive buying behavior. People who were exposed to an other-benefit frame chose to buy the cookies more often (15.8%; with points they earned by participating in this study) than those who were exposed to the self-benefit frame (3.9%, $\chi^2 = 19.76$, $f2 = 0.17$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is accepted. Among the people who were exposed to the neutral condition, 9.9% chose to buy the cookies impulsively. This percentage does not differ significantly from the other-benefit frame ($p = 0.150$) or the self-benefit frame ($p = 0.132$). Again, Process Model 4 shows that moral justification functions as a mediator in the effect of message frame on impulse buying ($b = 0.46$, SE = 0.15, 95% CI: [0.21–0.80]), and deservingness justification does not function as a mediator in this effect ($b = 05$, SE = 0.06, 95% CI: [−0.06 to 0.17]). Thus, the effect of the message frame on impulse buying is explained only by moral justification. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is also accepted.

To substantiate that people were morally *justified* to impulsively buy the cookies (and not bought impulsively, e.g., for purely altruistic reasons), we additionally asked them about who they wanted to benefit from by buying the cookies (themselves vs. others). In all the three conditions, thus also in the other-benefit message condition, people admitted that they (at least partially) wanted to buy the cookies for selfish reasons ($M_{neutral} = 3.05$, SD = 1.56, $M_{self} = 2.78$, SD = 1.66; $M_{other} = 4.64$, SD = 1.87).

3.2.5 | Discussion

Experiment 2 shows that message frames have an indirect effect on impulse buying urges through moral justification (H3). Additionally, it shows a direct effect of message framing on impulse buying behavior, as hypothesized in H2. This direct effect is partially explained or mediated by moral justification (H3). Based on the results, it can be concluded that people seem to adopt reasons to buy, which are communicated through an other-benefit message frame (compared to a self-benefit message frame) and use them to morally justify impulsively buying the cookies. We show that people seem to need altruistic reasons to buy an indulgent product on impulse and that sustainability-driven companies can provide these reasons to consumers, which is of high value for practitioners.

We performed a sensitivity analysis, using *G*Power* (Faul et al., 2007) to assess the minimal effect size Experiment 2 could reliably detect, given the used sample size ($N = 524$). This analysis showed that the smallest effect size to be detected was $f2 = 0.02$, which was substantially smaller than the found effect size ($f2 = 0.17$). Therefore, this experiment appeared to be well powered to detect effect sizes in

[4]The Dutch word "gunnen" is used in the questionnaire, which is difficult to translate into English. "Gunnen" means that one grants something to, in this case, oneself and feels that s/he deserves this gratification or at least allow themselves to enjoy it.

[5]Again, we also included some exploratory variables such as BMI. These variables will not be reported in this article. For a full list of these exploratory variables please contact the corresponding author.

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the small to medium range, thus limiting type 1 error concerns. Nevertheless, we decided to replicate Experiment 2 for robustness and reliability. Replication is essential to ensure certainty in the found results (McEwan et al., 2018).

3.3 | Experiment 3

3.3.1 | Design, participants, stimulus material, and procedure

The third experiment ($N = 527$) was also vignette based. The aim of Experiment 3 was to replicate the results observed in Experiment 2 and thus again test Hypotheses 1–3, as well as to test the effect of impulse buying urges on impulse buying behavior (H4) to present a complete conceptual model. Experiment 3 is an exact replication of Experiment 2, with the exception of the few minor changes that we describe below.

Experiment 3, similar to Experiment 2, used a single-factor between-subjects design with "message frame" as the IV. However, as the neutral message frame did not significantly differ from the self-benefit and other-benefit message frames in Experiment 2, we only tested the two latter conditions in Experiment 3 (self-benefit vs. other-benefit message frame). This way we created a plain replication of the observed effects. From the 1096 people who started the online experiment, 527 passed the two attention checks and fully completed the questionnaire ($n^{other} = 237$; $n^{self} = 290$). The sample was again representative of the Dutch population vis-à-vis sex (51.4% identified as female, 48.4% as male, 0.2% did not identify as male or female), age ($M = 48.13$, SD = 16.68), and education (31.7% was theoretically trained, 35.5% was practically trained, 31.1% only finished high school, and 1.7% did not have a diploma).

3.3.2 | Measurements

The measurements in Experiment 3 do not differ from those in Experiment 2. However, in Experiment 3, no additional explorative variables were measured because the main reason for performing this experiment was replication. Therefore, the measured variables were limited to moral justification (explained variance = 91.78%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 4.2$, SD = 1.7), deservingness justification (explained variance = 93.56%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 3.1$, SD = 1.8), impulse buying urge (explained variance = 91.34%, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 3.0$, SD = 1.8), impulse buying behavior (one item), who the participants wanted to benefit from the purchase (one item; ranging from 1 = only to benefit myself to 7 = only to benefit others, $M = 3.6$, SD = 1.9), and the demographic variables sex, education, and age.

3.3.3 | Results

A one-way ANOVA shows no direct effect of message frame on impulse buying urge (F (1, 525) = 3.30, $p = 0.07$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is rejected again. However, Process Model 4 demonstrates a mediation effect of message frame on impulse buying urges through moral justification ($b = 0.68$, SE = 0.11, 95% CI: [0.48–0.89]), meaning that an other-benefit frame positively affects impulse buying urges through moral justification (H3). Message framing does not affect impulse buying urges through deservingness justification ($b = 0.09$, SE = 0.12 95% CI: [−0.16 to 0.33]).

In line with Experiment 2, Experiment 3 also finds a direct positive effect of message frame on impulsive buying behavior. People who were exposed to an other-benefit frame chose to buy the cookies more often (17.3%, with points they earned by participating in this study) than those who were exposed to the self-benefit frame (8.6%, $\chi^2 = 8.97$, $f2 = 0.16$, $p = 0.003$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is again accepted. Again, Process Model 4 shows that moral justification functions as a mediator in the effect of message frame on impulse buying ($b = 0.47$, SE = 0.12, 95% CI: [0.27–0.74]), and deservingness justification does not ($b = 03$, SE = 0.04, 95% CI: [−0.06 to 0.12]). Thus, the effect of the message frame on impulse buying is explained only by moral justification. Hence, Hypothesis 3 is also accepted. Moreover, in both conditions, people again admitted that they (at least partially) wanted to buy the cookies for selfish reasons ($M_{self} = 3.08$, SD = 1.70; $M_{other} = 4.28$, SD = 1.92). This again indicated that people who were exposed to the other-benefit frame *morally justified* why they were allowed to buy the cookies on impulse and did not buy the cookies purely for, for example, altruistic reasons.

Finally, a linear regression shows that Hypothesis 4 (impulse buying urges lead to impulse buying behaviors) is also supported (F (1, 525) = 17.14, $p \leq 0.001$). The impulse buying urge is indeed a predictor of impulse buying behavior ($b = 0.18$, t [526] = 4.14, $p \leq 0.001$). An overview of the accepted and rejected hypotheses based on the results of Experiments 1–3 is presented in Figure 2.

3.3.4 | Discussion

Experiment 3 replicates the effects found in Experiment 2, gaining confidence in the results (McEwan et al., 2018). Furthermore, it shows that impulse buying behavior is predicted by impulse buying urges. These results strengthen the proposed idea that other-benefit advertising frames are used by consumers to morally justify the purchase of hedonic goods, which results in impulse buying behavior.

Again, we performed a sensitivity analysis using *G*Power* (Faul et al., 2007). The smallest effect size to be detected was $f2 = 0.02$. Because the found effect size in Experiment 3 is considerably larger ($f2 = 0.16$), it can be concluded that this study is well powered.

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to identify whether companies engaging in sustainability initiatives should communicate through self-benefit- or other-benefit-framed advertisements to enhance the number of impulse purchases. The literature on sustainability

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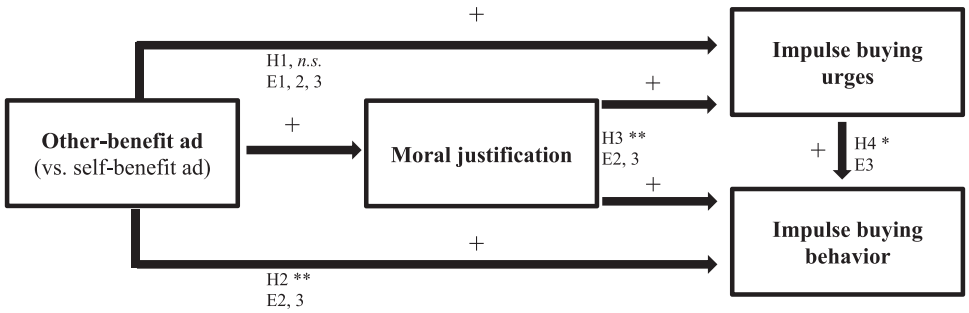

FIGURE 2 Conceptual model showing the observed results of each of the tested hypotheses in Experiment 1–3. *Significant effect measured in one study; **significant effect in two studies.

management showed that consumers value a company's engagement in sustainability-driven activities (Coleman et al., 2020). However, expressing these activities in advertisements could be interpreted as ethically doubtful and, therefore, backfire (Barone et al., 2000; also see Chang & Cheng, 2015), thus complicating companies' decision-making on what frame to use in their advertisements. Therefore, various researchers have recommended further in-depth studies on the advertising appeals of sustainability-driven companies (e.g., Taylor, 2018). The second objective was to examine the role of justification in the effect of advertising framing on purchase behavior. Until now, very little attention has been devoted to justification processes, especially moral justification processes, of (impulsive consumer) behavior, while understanding justification is important to fully comprehend behavior (Holland et al., 2002).

With three experiments, the present study shows that other-benefit-framed advertisements (compared to self-benefit-framed advertisements) have an effect on consumers' moral justifications and that these subsequently affect consumers' impulsive buying urges and impulse buying behavior of indulgent products. Advertising framing does not seem to affect impulse buying through deservingness justification. Our results also show that advertising framing has a direct effect on impulse buying behavior; other-benefit-framed advertisements lead to more impulse purchases than self-benefit-framed advertisements. Thus, the results of this study suggest that consumers need an altruistic reason to impulsively buy a self-indulgent product, and that sustainability-driven companies can provide these reasons to them by means of advertising.

These findings contribute to both sustainability management research and stakeholder theory, as they argue that business and ethics should not and cannot be separated (Hörisch et al., 2014). An other-benefit frame combines business and ethics in one advertising frame, which, as is found in our experiments, appears to be more effective than using self-benefit frames, where the ethics part is not interlinked within the advertisement. Moreover, with these findings, this study contributes to the literature on advertising framing, justification, and impulse buying behavior. Previous studies have mainly studied the effects of other-benefit versus self-benefit message frames within the domains of donation behavior (e.g., Fisher et al., 2008) or eco-friendly behavior (e.g., Jäger & Weber, 2020; Tih et al., 2016) and have neither studied these frames in the contexts of corporate social responsibility nor impulse buying behavior. Furthermore, studies evaluating message framing have observed inconsistent results on the type of frame that is more effective (e.g., Jäger & Weber, 2020; Yadav, 2016). The present study adds to knowledge of the effects of message framing on impulse buying behavior in a sustainability management context by demonstrating, as hypothesized, that other-benefit-framed advertisements for socially responsible companies elicit more impulse purchases than self-benefit-framed advertisements. Additionally, we contribute to the limited but important research on justification-based mechanisms of consumers (Taylor et al., 2014) by distinguishing between the two types of justifications. We studied their roles in the effect of message framing on impulsive consumer behavior and interpreted the outcomes in light of the vice/virtue response conflict. Moreover, we are the first to introduce the concept of moral justification to the marketing and consumer psychology literature, which potentially enriches the scientific perspective of advertising framing.

People often experience an internal vice/virtue response conflict and feelings of cognitive dissonance when buying on impulse (Kubany et al., 1996; Lades, 2014). The reasons that sustainability-driven companies put forward, by means of an other-benefit framed advertisement, can help people feel morally justified to buy and, therefore, seemingly reduce this conflict and decrease cognitive dissonance. Assumedly, consumers feel more comfortable buying on impulse after being exposed to an other-benefit message (vs. a self-benefit message), as such a frame answers both to one's immediate gratification urges and one's sense of responsibility for their long-term goals. In contrast to moral justification, our findings show that deservingness justification does not mediate the effect of message framing on impulse buying. This does not necessarily mean that self-benefit-framed messages do not help consumers to deal with their vice/virtue conflicts. Theoretically, it is possible that a self-benefit frame *does* soften the conflict and reduce cognitive dissonance with consumers, only not by providing reasons to justify an impulse purchase but by stimulating people to act in line with their long-term goals. Perhaps a self-benefit-framed message (unintentionally) reminds people of their long-term goals by emphasizing the "self" in the message. This could also explain why, of our sample in Experiment 2, only 3.9% wanted to buy the cookies after being exposed to the self-benefit message frame versus 9.9% who wanted

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to buy the cookies after being exposed to the neutral message frame. Although this difference was not significant, it was remarkable that approximately three times as many people wanted to buy on impulse in the neutral condition compared to the self-benefit condition. This outcome would be interesting to study in more detail in the future.

As we conducted a field experiment and two online vignette-based experiments, the external validity of our research was relatively high (compared to only lab experiments). Nonetheless, we recommend that researchers replicate our findings in other shopping environments and with other types of products. This suggestion stems not only from generalizability reasons. As self-benefit frames are often used in advertising and our results suggest that self-benefit frames do not provide justifications for buying on impulse for the consumer, future studies on this topic are recommended to draw more robust conclusions on the (lack of) effect of such frames on impulse buying and other consumer behavioral outcomes. It would also be interesting to explore the effects of advertising frames on planned purchases. It is reasonable to believe that people need less or other types of justifications for planned purchases than for impulse purchases (Okada, 2005; Warden et al., 2006). This could mean that the effects of advertising frames on planned purchases differ from the effect of those frames on impulse purchases.

This study has several interesting implications for marketing practitioners and consumer psychologists. This study's insights may help sustainability-driven companies to decide on their advertising strategies by providing evidence that other-benefit-framed advertisements are more effective in enhancing impulse purchases than self-benefit-framed advertisements. Sustainability-driven companies can evoke moral justifications in consumers, which can increase profits derived from impulse purchases. Increasing the number of impulse purchases could help such companies to strengthen their competitive positions (Mehra et al., 2017) toward nonsocially responsible companies. Moreover, marketers and consumer psychologists should critically re-evaluate advertisements that contain self-benefit message frames focused on deservingness justification, as the outcomes of our experiments suggest that consumers do not adopt reasons to buy from such frames and, accordingly, that these frames do not affect impulse buying (urges). Furthermore, this study also encourages nonsustainability-driven companies to change their business models by taking more social responsibility, as this could both enhance sales gained from consumers' impulse buying decisions *and* contribute to a fairer world.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in rdm at https://rdm.uva.nl.

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