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**Message Assertiveness and Price Discount in Prosocial Advertising: Differences between  
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# **Message Assertiveness and Price Discount in Prosocial Advertising: Differences between Americans and Koreans**

## **ABSTRACT**

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

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

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

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

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

## INTRODUCTION

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

We undertook this research to examine the influence of three factors: 1) assertive versus nonassertive advertising messages; 2) message recipients' cultural backgrounds; and 3) price discounts. First, assertive messages using imperative language such as "You must recycle" can provoke reactance by threatening autonomy, so that messages fail to persuade (Baek, et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017; Kronrod, et al., 2011, 2012). Second, cultural backgrounds may determine the effectiveness of message assertiveness: message recipients in Western cultures are more likely show psychological reactance, but consumers in Eastern cultures will be equally receptive to assertive and nonassertive messages (Kim et al., 2017). However, scant attention, if any, has

been paid to the possibility that price discounts may alter the joint effects of messages. In this research, we fill the gap by focusing on how price discounts change the dynamics of message assertiveness and cultural differences.

Specifically, we study whether consumers in Western and Eastern cultures will be more or less receptive to assertive messages indicating full versus discounted product prices. Although messages connected with full-price ads tend to be less persuasive, they are more persuasive when buyers learn that they will pay less than they initially expected, which causes them to feel gratitude and desires to reciprocate by complying with seller requests, a phenomenon called the *reciprocity principle* (Andrew et al., 2014; Cialdini, 2001; Xia and Bechwati, 2017). Indeed, consumers who are already motivated to do good tend to respond better to assertive prosocial messages (Kronrod, et al., 2012).

The United States and South Korea fall at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum regarding attitudes toward *individualism* and *power distance* (Hofstede, 1983 a, b). Americans adhere to individualistic values, such as autonomy, personal freedom, and ambition, and tend to value low power distance, while Koreans value collectivism, ingroup harmony, and hierarchical power distance (Hofstede, 1983a, b; Triandis, et al., 1988). Consequently, East-West differences emerge in reactions to compliance-seeking commands: Americans (Koreans) will show reactive (compliance) responses to assertive messages. However, price discounts may alter their reactions.

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

effectiveness of prosocial messages across Eastern and Western cultures. Second, assertive language is known to evoke reactance, but we suggest that reactive responses to prosocial advertising are culture-specific. Therefore, our findings provide novel implications for social marketers regarding how to couple message assertiveness and price discounts to maximize the success of prosocial messages in different cultures.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES**

### ***Discount Effects on Prosocial Compliance***

As public attention turns to essential needs for ethical consumption, corporations are increasing their prosocial profiles by publicizing their support for prosocial causes (Forbes, 2019). They often persuade consumers to support positive causes by offering price discounts on socially beneficial products or services (Gamliel and Herstein, 2010; Tseung, 2016; Yoon et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2019; Zollo et al., 2018). For instance, Starbucks offers discounts to customers who bring their own reusable cups. The Eileen Fisher clothing company provides discounts to customers who donate gently worn clothing to support programs that benefit women around the world.

Marketing researchers have investigated how price discount strategies affect various consumer behaviors, including perceptions of advertising (Kim et al., 2019; McKechnie et al., 2012; Gamliel and Herstein, 2012), brand choices (Lattin and Bucklin, 1989), brand satisfaction (Yoon and Vargas, 2010), post-purchase consumption (Lee and Tsai, 2014), value perceptions (Yoon et al., 2014), customer reviews (Zhu et al., 2018), purchase quantities (Yoon and Vargas, 2011), and charitable giving or buying (Andrew et al., 2014; Tseng 2016; Xia and Bechwati, 2017).

Studies showing that price discounts encourage green consumerism and social responsibility are particularly relevant to our context (Tseung, 2016). Green or prosocial behaviors such as recycling, donating, and carrying reusable containers require both monetary and nonmonetary sacrifices (Monroe, 2003; Yoon et al., 2016; Zeithaml, 1988), while price discounts are perceived as monetary gains that offset potential sacrifices (Tseung, 2016). Thus, consumers are more willing to comply with the socially responsible request to purchase cause-related products when it is combined with price discount (Tseung, 2016; Xia and Bechwati, 2017). For instance, field experiments using about 17,000 consumers showed that moderate price discounts motivate consumers to support advertised causes (Andrew et al., 2014).

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

We examine whether unconditional discounts will increase compliance with subsequent prosocial requests. Consumers tend to have elevated moods when they perceive that they have “gotten a good deal” (Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, and Burton 1990). Similarly, discounts cause shoppers to feel relieved about saving money. Their elevated mood will cause them to favorably evaluate the store and their overall shopping experience (Heilman, Nakamoto, and Rao, 2002). The reciprocity principle explains that consumers feel gratitude and psychological pressure to

reciprocate when they perceive that companies have provided discount benefits. As a result, consumers increase purchases and support matters significant to the company, including prosocial requests (Andrew et al., 2014; Dahl et al., 2005; Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Ha et al., 2006; Janakiraman et al., 2006; Morales, 2005; Xia and Bechwati, 2017).

### ***Reactions to Assertive Messages***

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

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



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

How do price discounts or the lack of discounts affect consumer motivations to comply with assertive messages? Will price discounts dampen the potential negative effects that may come from assertive messages? As discussed earlier, price discount tend to elevate consumers' mood state and people in positive moods tend to have relaxed perceptions of social rules, more flexibility, and process language less systematically (Martin and Davies, 1998). They tend to use more assertive, direct language for making requests, and often underestimate the chances of being offensive (Forgas, 1998; 1999a; 1999b; Sinclair and Mark, 1992). When message tones or appeals match their expectations, consumers will perceive that messages are fluent and will be more compliant (Kim et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2009; Lee and Libro, 2004; Lee et al., 2018, 2019). When buyers pay less than they initially expected, they feel gratitude and emotional satisfaction, causing them to enjoy positive moods (Yoon and Vargas, 2010). Further, aligned with the reciprocity principle, assertive prosocial messages tend to be more effective for consumers who are already motivated to be good actors (Kronrod, et al., 2012). Similarly, when consumers are motivated to give back to the company, we expect them to be more receptive to assertive prosocial messages because assertive prosocial messages are particularly explicit and intense and

thus indicate that the firm cares deeply about the issue. Consequently, they will expect and comply with direct and assertive language (Kronrod et al., 2011). Without price-discounts, however, assertive message would trigger reactance. In summary, price discounts would elicit feelings of gratitude, reciprocal motivations, altered language expectations, and receptivity to assertive messages.

### ***Cultural Background as Moderator***

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

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

First, the individualism-collectivism distinction represents the degree to which individuals' life belongs to the individuals or to a social group. The tenet of individualistic culture is individuals' autonomy and freedom, while the essence of collectivistic culture tends to be the ingroup harmony (Triandis et al., 1988; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). Thus, consumers from collectivistic cultures have increased tolerance for messages that potentially threaten autonomous freedom because of they have comparatively lower desires for individual freedom. Accordingly, a recent has found that assertive messages tend to backfire only in

individualistic Western cultures, such as in the United States where the individualism index is 91, but the boomerang effect disappears in collectivistic Eastern cultures, such as South Korea where the individualism index is 18 (Kim et al., 2017).

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

Beyond individualism/collectivism effects, power distance should affect receptivity to language usage. In organizational settings, employees from high power distance cultures tend to be more tolerant of offensive and forceful verbal communication (Bond, Wan, Leung, and Giacalone, 1985). For instance, if bosses speak forcefully or even verbally insult subordinates, Hong King citizens (PDI of 68) accept the behavior as more legitimate than Americans (PDI of

40) (Bond et al.,1985). Consequently, U.S. consumers are more likely to react negatively than Koreans to confrontational, compliance-seeking languages indicating hierarchical power.

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

Because of cultural differences in receptivity toward assertive messages, we expect that American consumers (Individualism index: 91; Power distance index: 40) will dislike when they perceive that assertive persuasion threatens their freedom, autonomy, and equality, but a price discount will evoke pleasant feeling and desires to reciprocate. In contrast, Korean consumers (Individualism index: 18; Power distance index: 60) have relatively high tolerance for hierarchy in social values and systems, so they will show less reactance (Kim et al., 2017): assertive and

nonassertive messages will be similarly persuasive, with or without price discounts. Accordingly, we predict:

**H1:** American consumers will comply more highly with a nonassertive (vs. assertive) prosocial message combined with no discount, but will comply more highly with an assertive (vs. nonassertive) message combined with a discount.

**H2:** Korean consumers will comply equally with assertive and nonassertive prosocial messages, irrespective of discounts.

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

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

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

[Place figure 1 about here]

## STUDY 1

### *Study Design and Participants*

For Study 1, we used a 2 (nationality: Americans vs. South Koreans) x 2 (price discount: no discount vs. discount) x 2 (message: assertive vs. nonassertive) between-subjects design. Participating in exchange for course credit were 190 students (61% men; 18 to 28 years-old [ $M = 21.02$ ,  $SD = 2.48$ ]); 114 undergraduates from a northeastern university in the United States

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

### ***Procedure***

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

### ***Manipulation***

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

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

In all our studies, we avoid confounding effects from language differences by carefully translating the English copy to Korean. To deliver similar assertive and nonassertive tones, a bilingual translator carefully translated the English manipulations to Korean; a second bilingual

translator back-translated the Korean version into English; and a third bilingual translator adjusted the copies (Choi et al. 2020; Yoon et al. 2020).

### **Measures**

To measure attitudes toward recycling, we used four 7-point semantic differential items adopted from Blankenship and Wegener (2008), anchored with *bad/good*, *unfavorable/favorable*, *foolish/wise*, and *negative/positive*. The four items were averaged to form a composite score ( $\alpha = .94$ ). For a manipulation check, we measured message assertiveness by asking participants to indicate the extent of their agreement with the statement “The ad message was assertive” on a 7-point scale anchored with *strongly disagree* (1) and *strongly agree* (7).

### **Results**

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ( $M_{assertive} = 4.33$ ) perceived the message to be more assertive than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ( $M_{nonassertive} = 2.74$ ;  $t(188) = 6.43, p = .000$ ). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ( $M_{assertive} = 4.40$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 2.27$ ;  $t(112) = 6.73, p = .000$ ) and South Koreans ( $M_{assertive} = 4.22$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 3.41$ ;  $t(188) = 2.17, p = .03$ ) perceived the assertive (vs. nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs. South Koreans) x 2 (price discount: no discount vs. discount) x 2 (message assertiveness: assertive vs. nonassertive) ANOVA on attitude toward recycling as the dependent variable. Nationality had a significant main effect ( $M_{American} = 6.62$  vs.  $M_{South Korean} = 6.33$ ;  $F(1, 182) = 4.14, p = .04, \eta^2 = .022$ ), but price discount ( $F(1, 182) = .57, p = .45, \eta^2 = .003$ ) and message assertiveness did not ( $F(1, 182) = .52, p = .47, \eta^2 = .003$ ). Significant two-way interaction effects were found for price discount x message assertiveness ( $F(1, 182) = 5.26, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ ), but not for nationality x price

discount ( $F(1, 182) = 1.72, p = .19, \eta^2 = .009$ ) and nationality x message assertiveness ( $F(1, 182) = .99, p = .32, \eta^2 = .005$ ). Relevant to our hypotheses was a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount, and message assertiveness on recycling attitudes ( $F(1, 182) = 7.45, p = .007, \eta^2 = .039$ ) (See Table 1).

[Place table 1 about here]

To better understand the three-way interaction, we examined the price discount x message assertiveness interaction for the American and South Korean populations. For Americans, a significant two-way interaction between discount and message assertiveness emerged ( $F(1, 110) = 17.74, p = .00, \eta^2 = .14$ ). As figure 2 shows, simple effect analysis results showed that the nonassertive message evoked more favorable attitudes toward recycling under the no discount condition ( $M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.43$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 6.93; t(34.77) = -4.38, p = .000$ ). In contrast, the assertive message generated a higher mean score of attitudes toward recycling in the discount condition ( $M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.80$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 6.17, t(25.28) = 2.19, p = .04$ ) (figure 2). For Koreans, the two-way interaction was nonsignificant ( $F(1, 72) = .07, p = .80, \eta^2 = .001$ : no discount condition ( $M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.25$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 6.43; t(35) = -.62, p = .54$ ); discount condition ( $M_{\text{assertive}} = 6.23$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 6.51; t(37) = -1.13, p = .27$ ). Thus, the results supported H1 and H2.

[Place figure 2 about here]

## ***Discussion***

Supporting our hypotheses, Study 1 shows that price discounts and cultural backgrounds jointly affect reactions to assertive pro-environmental messages. For Americans, the assertive message was more effective than non-assertive message when participants purchased a product with a discount, while the opposite pattern emerged in the absence of price discount. In contrast,



for Korean, the persuasiveness of assertive and non-assertive messages did not differ regardless of a price discounts.

The results support our predictions, but the United States and Korea have different environmental policies that might have intensified the three-way interaction. In particular, the United States has no national laws mandating recycling (Kim et al., 2016). Many states do not regulate recycling, but a few cities and states, such as Seattle and Minnesota, have mandatory recycling laws for commercial entities (Northeast Recycling Council, 2017). Thus, many American consumers view recycling as a matter of individual choice and free will (Kim et al. 2016). In contrast, since the 1990s, the Korean government has initiated mandatory recycling laws for collecting waste and reusing natural resources. For instance, residents are fined if they fail to separate general garbage, food waste, and recyclable items. The cross-national differences in environmental policies might have affected how well participants received assertive messages with price promotions. In addition, the limited sample of Koreans (n=76) may have caused the nonsignificant interaction effect between price discount and message assertiveness for Koreans (H2), because small samples increase the likelihood of Type II errors. Consequently, we used a larger sample in Study 2 and examined whether a different domain would show a similar data pattern.

## **STUDY 2**

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

### ***Study Design and Participants***

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

Participating in exchange for course credit were 201 undergraduate students (59.7% men; 19 to 30 years-old [ $M = 21.38$ ,  $SD = 2.42$ ]), 95 from a northeastern university in the United States (66.3% men; 19 to 21 years-old [ $M = 19.46$ ,  $SD = .58$ ]) and 106 from a university in Seoul, South Korea (53.8% men; 19 to 30 years-old [ $M = 23.11$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ]).

### ***Manipulation***

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

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

### ***Procedure and Measures***

American and Korean participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. American (Korean) participants were first exposed to a reservation page including details about an all-inclusive resort and casino trip to Tampa, FL (Kangwon Land Casino). We asked them to imagine booking the trip. At checkout, some received no discount; others received a 40% discount. Next they viewed a confirmation page featuring either an assertive or nonassertive message soliciting donations for underprivileged children. Participants indicated how much they would donate: \$0 to \$100 for Americans, and ₩0 to ₩100,000 for Koreans. One USD (\$) is approximately equivalent to 1000 Korean Won (₩). In the analysis stage, we converted Korean Won (₩) into USD (\$).

### **Results**

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ( $M_{assertive} = 5.17$ ) perceived the message to be more assertive and forceful than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ( $M_{nonassertive} = 3.36$ ;  $t(199) = 7.31, p = .000$ ). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ( $M_{assertive} = 4.94$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 3.53$ ;  $t(93) = 3.75, p = .000$ ) and South Koreans ( $M_{assertive} = 5.39$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 3.21$ ;  $t(104) = 6.65, p = .000$ ) perceive the assertive (vs. nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs. South Koreans) x 2 (price discount: no discount vs. discount) x 2 (message assertiveness: assertive vs. nonassertive) ANOVA on the donation amount as the dependent variable. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of price discount ( $M_{no\_discount} = 15.51$  vs.  $M_{price\_discount} = 21.47$ ;  $F(1, 180) = 4.47, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ ) but no main effects of nationality ( $F(1, 180) = 2.93, p = .09, \eta^2 = .02$ ) or message assertiveness ( $F(1, 180) = .16, p = .69, \eta^2 = .00$ ). Also, no significant two-way interaction effects were found: price discount x message assertiveness ( $F(1, 180) = 2.42, p = .12, \eta^2 = .01$ ); nationality x price discount ( $F(1, 180) = 2.06, p = .15, \eta^2 = .01$ ); nationality x message assertiveness ( $F(1, 180) = .00, p = .94, \eta^2 = .00$ ). Relevant to our hypotheses, as in Study 1, we observed a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount, and message assertiveness on recycling attitudes ( $F(1, 180) = 4.39, p = .04, \eta^2 = .02$ ) (See Table 2).

[Place table 2 about here]

To better understand the three-way interaction, we examined the price discount x message assertiveness interactions. Americans showed a significant two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness ( $F(1, 91) = 8.46, p = .01, \eta^2 = .09$ ). Consistent with the findings of Study 1, simple effect analysis showed that the nonassertive message without a price discount promoted higher donations ( $M_{assertive} = 7.32$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 16.11$ ;  $t(43) = -2.14, p$

= .04). In contrast, the assertive message with the discount evoked higher donations ( $M_{assertive} = 26.36$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 15.84$ ,  $t(48) = 2.07$ ,  $p = .047$ ), supporting H1. However, South Koreans showed a nonsignificant two-way interaction ( $F(1, 89) = .12$ ,  $p = .73$ ,  $\eta^2 = .00$ ): no price discount condition ( $M_{assertive} = 21.36$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 18.70$ ;  $t(40) = .56$ ,  $p = .58$ ); price discount condition ( $M_{assertive} = 21.73$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 21.92$ ;  $t(49) = -.30$ ,  $p = .98$ ) (See figure 3).

[Place figure 3 about here]

### ***Discussion***

Study 2 replicates Study 1 and provides additional evidence supporting the hypotheses in another prosocial context, a charitable donation campaign. American participants indicated that they would donate more when they received a price discount at checkout, indicating that the adverse effect of message assertiveness was reversed. Koreans showed no differences in charitable donation amounts regardless of discounts or message assertiveness.

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

## **STUDY 3**

In Study 3, our goal was to 1) replicate the findings of Studies 1 and 2 with a different “Buy 1, Get 1 free” price promotion using a water conservation campaign, and 2) examine the

mediating roles of mood and reciprocity as an underlying mechanism for the discount-assertiveness interaction effect.

### ***Study Design and Participants***

For Study 3, we used a 2 (nationality: Americans vs. South Koreans) x 2 (price discount: no discount vs. discount) x 2 (message: assertive vs. nonassertive) between-subjects design. We also measured individual-level individualism and power distance. We recruited 248 undergraduates in exchange for course credit (50.2% men; 19 to 35 years-old [ $M = 21.33$ ,  $SD = 2.30$ ]): 128 from a northeastern university in the United States (61.4% men; 19 to 35 years-old [ $M = 19.84$ ,  $SD = 2.51$ ]); and 120 from a university in Seoul, South Korea (38.3% men; 19 to 28 years-old [ $M = 22.92$ ,  $SD = 2.88$ ]).

### ***Manipulation***

*Price discount.* To manipulate price discount, we asked participants to imagine purchasing 4 packs of toothpaste for \$20. Participants in the full price condition were told that they would receive no discount. Participants in the discount condition were told that they would receive a “Buy 1, Get 1 Free” discount, giving them eight packs for \$20.

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

### ***Measures***

Chronic power distance beliefs were measured with nine 7-point scale items from Zhang, Winterich, and Mittal (2010) ( $\alpha = .81$ ). For example, “As citizens, we should highly value

conformity,” and “In work-related matters, managers have a right to expect obedience from subordinates.” We administered Singelis’s (1994) six 7-point scale items ( $\alpha = .78$ ) to measure chronic-level individualism, such as “I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects,” and “I am comfortable with being singled out for praise or rewards.” Next, mood was measured with three 7-point semantic differential scales anchored with sad/happy, unpleasant/pleasant and bad/ good (Baron and Bronfen, 1994) ( $\alpha = .95$ ). To measure reciprocity desires, we used two 7-point scale items: “I am willing to reciprocate by supporting the *Mallinis* brand”; “I expect to repay the favor received from *Mallinis*” (Dorsch and Kelley, 1994) ( $\alpha = .87$ ). We measured individual predispositions to save water with two 7-point Likert scales, “It is my civic responsibility to use water efficiently”; and “I try to reduce my water use” ( $\alpha = .85$ ) To measure behavioral intentions to comply, we asked participants how often they would practice the four suggested water-saving behaviors, measured (e.g., turn off the faucet while brushing teeth, use a cup instead of running taps while brushing). on a 7-point Likert scale anchored with (1) never and (7) always. The answers were averaged to form a composite score ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### ***Procedure***

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

### ***Results***

Overall, participants exposed to the assertive ad ( $M_{assertive} = 4.93$ ) perceived the message to be more assertive than did participants exposed to the nonassertive ad ( $M_{nonassertive} = 3.27$ ;  $t(246) = 7.78, p = .00$ ). The message assertiveness manipulation was also successful at each population level: Americans ( $M_{assertive} = 5.08$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 3.65$ ;  $t(126) = 4.81, p = .000$ ) and South Koreans ( $M_{assertive} = 4.77$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 2.85$ ;  $t(118) = 6.45, p = .000$ ) perceived the assertive (vs. nonassertive) ad to be more assertive.

We performed a 2 (nationality: Americans vs. South Koreans) x 2 (price discount: no discount vs. discount) x 2 (Message Assertiveness: assertive vs. nonassertive) ANCOVA with individual predisposition to saving water as a covariate. The covariate significantly affected behavioral intentions to save water ( $F(1, 237) = 61.80, p = .00$ ). Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, even after we controlled for individual tendencies to conserve water, we found a significant three-way interaction of nationality, price discount, and message assertiveness on water saving intentions ( $F(1, 237) = 8.40, p = .00, \eta^2 = .03$ ) (See Table 3).

[Place table 3 about here]

To better understand the interactions, we examined the price discount x message assertiveness interaction for Americans and Koreans separately. Replicating findings of Studies 1 and 2, Americans showed a significant two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness ( $F(1, 121) = 16.90, p = .00, \eta^2 = .12$ ). In particular, contrasts revealed that in the absence of the discount, Americans indicated stronger intentions for water conservation when they viewed the nonassertive message ( $M_{assertive} = 3.78$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.89$ ;  $t(65) = -4.19, p = .00$ ), while the presence of the discount reversed the effect ( $M_{assertive} = 4.90$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.25$ ;  $t(59) = 2.73, p = .01$ ). In contrast, South Koreans ( $F(1, 115) = .30, p = .59, \eta^2 = .003$ ) indicated no such interactions in the no discount ( $M_{assertive} = 4.00$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.14$ ;  $t(56) =$

-37,  $p = .71$ ) or discount conditions ( $M_{assertive} = 4.33$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.40$ ;  $t(60) = -.24, p = .81$ ) (figure 4).

[Place figure 4 about here]

### ***Mediation Analysis***

To examine the process by which price discounts influence consumers' reactions to assertive versus nonassertive messages, we tested the sequential mediating roles of mood and reciprocity using a bootstrapping analysis. Americans and Koreans did not differ in mood ( $M_{american} = 4.88$  vs.  $M_{korean} = 5.11$ ;  $t(56) = -1.28, p = .21$ ) and reciprocity ( $M_{american} = 3.05$  vs.  $M_{korean} = 3.27$ ;  $t(56) = -1.31, p = .19$ ).

In H1 and H2, we predicted the discount-assertiveness interaction for Americans, but not for Koreans. Thus, to better understand the underlying mechanism, we conducted mediation analysis for American participants only. To examine the process by which price discounts influence American reactions to assertive versus nonassertive messages, we tested the sequential mediating roles of mood and reciprocity, using the PROCESS macro (Models 4 and 14; Hayes, 2012).

As shown in Figure 5, the mediation analysis suggested that the model explains 7.0% of the variance in mood, and the price discount had a significant positive effect on mood ( $b = .39, p = .00$ ). The model explained 5.0% of the variance in reciprocity. There was a significant direct effect of mood on reciprocity ( $b = .17, p = .03$ ), but the direct effect of a price discount on reciprocity was not significant ( $b = .05, p = .66$ ). The model explained 14.7% of the variance in individual water saving intentions. Mood ( $b = .13, p = .047$ ), reciprocity ( $b = .72, p = .00$ ), and message assertiveness ( $b = 1.22, p = .02$ ) each had significant positive effects on water saving intentions, and there was a significant negative interactive effect between reciprocity and



message assertiveness on water saving intention ( $b = -.34, p = .04$ ). In sum, these findings suggest that the effect of a price discount on consumers' prosocial behavior is sequentially and fully mediated by consumers' mood and reciprocity, which in turn, interacts with message assertiveness.

[Place figure 5 about here]

### ***Additional Analysis***

Based on Hofstede's power distance cultural dimensions, we examined varying levels of individualism and power distance beliefs among individuals living within the United States and South Korea. The heterogeneous United States has a blended population of diverse ethnicities and races, so individual Americans may have substantially varying cultural orientations (Brewer and Venaik, 2012; Yoon et al. 2020). Thus, we measured individual differences in chronic-level individualism and power distance.

We conducted a series of moderated regression analyses using PROCESS macro (Model 3; Hayes 2012) with discount and message assertiveness as categorical measures, and chronic individualism and power distance belief scores (irrespective of nationality) as a continuous measure. Chronic individualism did not moderate the interaction between discount and message assertiveness ( $b = -.06, t = -.40, p = .69$ ), but when we entered chronic power distance into the model, the three-way interaction was significant ( $b = -.38, t = -2.84, p = .005$ ). Using the median split, we divided participants into those who scored high ( $M = 4.80, SD = .59$ ) or low on PD ( $M = 2.86, SD = .65$ ). Of 128 American participants, 97 (75.8%) were in the low PD group. Of 120 Korean participants, 93 (78%) were in the high PD group. For the high PD group, the two-way interaction between price discount and message assertiveness was not significant ( $F(1, 109) = .89, p = .35, \eta^2 = .01$ ), but for the low PD group, the two-way interaction was significant ( $F(1,$

102) = .10.38,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ ). Contrasts suggested that for those with low PD, non-assertive (vs. non-assertive) messages is more effective with no price discount ( $M_{assertive} = 3.76$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.78$ ;  $t(54) = -3.44$ ,  $p = .00$ ), while the effect of message assertiveness is reversed with price discount ( $M_{assertive} = 4.86$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 4.25$ ;  $t(50) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .045$ ). The data suggest that power distance, but not chronic individualism, explains why Americans, but not Koreans, showed varying attitudes toward discounts and message assertiveness.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Prosocial advertisers widely use assertive messages to encourage prosocial attitudes and behaviors (Kronrod et al., 2012), but ironically, assertive messages may cause reactance (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Fitzsimons and Lehmann, 2004; Grandpre et al., 2003; Quick and Considine, 2008). We applied cultural theories and the reciprocity principle to observe whether reactance responses to assertive message hold across culturally different audiences and different consumption situations. In three studies, we find strong evidence supporting the moderating role of price discounts and cultural backgrounds on the persuasiveness of assertive prosocial messages. We find that reactance responses emerge among Americans only when they pay full prices, but discounts reverse the effect. In contrast, Korean consumers equally favor both assertive and nonassertive messages, regardless of price discounts. We suggest that cultural differences regarding expectation and acceptance for power equality cause the varying reactions. Further, our findings suggest that the price discount alleviate the principled negative effect of message assertiveness on consumers' prosocial behavior through consumers' elevated mood state and willingness to reciprocate.

Our studies make several theoretical contributions. First, building on psychological reactance theory (Brehm, 1966), we question assumptions that humans are basically driven to

desire free choice, and that all people will resist threats to their personal freedom. Our findings suggest that human nature does not default to negative reactions to the psychological threats implicit in assertive messages. Instead, audience and situational factors determine whether assertive messages will evoke reactance. Most studies examining the relative effectiveness of assertive and nonassertive messages have overlooked reciprocity and culture (except for Kim et al., 2017), and have generally observed attitudinal and behavioral responses to assertive versus nonassertive messages among consumers from North America or West European countries (Dillard and Shen, 2005; Grandpre et al., 2003; Quick and Considine, 2008). However, we concur with Savani et al. (2008) in showing that longstanding assumptions about human desires for freedom or free choice apply more strongly to individualistic, low power-distance cultures.

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

Although some studies have incorporated cross-culture perspectives to investigate motivations for prosocial behaviors (Chan and Lau, 2002; Kalafatis, 1999; Kärnä et al., 2003; Lavack and Kropp, 2003; Minton et al., 2015; Singhapakdi et al., 2001; Yoon et al. 2020) or to

analyze the contents of ads that appeal to different cultures (Carlson et al., 1996), few studies have investigated the persuasiveness of different message strategies in culturally distinct nations. We compare the United States and South Korea, known to differ in many cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism, power equality; Choi et al., 2015, 2020; Errmann et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2016, 2017; Yoon et al., 2016, 2020). Accordingly, our findings may generalize to other populations from countries representing different dimensions of individualism and power distance.

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

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

Our study has open paths for future research. First, future researchers may examine whether priming power distance could change the pattern of results (Yoon, 2013). Situational influences such as power distance priming may override original cultural orientations (Winterich

and Zhang, 2014). For instance, if consumers from East Asia are primed with low power distance, would price discounts change their responses to assertive versus nonassertive messages? Several studies have indicated that East Asians will generally feel more indebted than North Americans after receiving help in everyday situations (Hitokoto, 2016; Hitokoto, Niiya and Tanaka-Matsumi, 2008), so we investigated desires to reciprocate as a mediator. Nevertheless, Study 3 indicated no significant differences in reciprocity desires between Americans and South Koreans. Thus, future research should investigate how various societal and marketing situations evoke different desires to reciprocate.

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## Appendix A

Assume that you order 2 packs of Coca-Cola cans online (24 cans per pack). You pay \$50 (\$40) including tax and delivery and receive no discount (20% discount). Two days later, you receive your order, with an environmental ad attached.

Assertive pro-environmental message

**RECYCLE  
WHAT YOU CAN!**

There is really no choice!  
Do something to recycle!

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

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

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

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

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Nonassertive pro-environmental message

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Appendix B

No discount and assertive donation message (Study 2)

### All-Inclusive J.C. Resort & Casino Tampa, FL

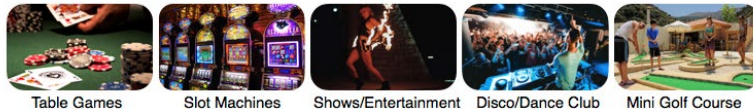


With the all-inclusive package, you can experience high-stakes excitement at a great value. You can sit back, relax, and enjoy the endless amenities with the best casinos in the world!

**Now, 3 Nights at \$ 500**

\* There are currently no discount promotions available for you.

#### - Resort Activities



#### - Resort Amenities



J.C. Resort & Casino

### Thank you for your reservation.

Your reservation number is: 68453418454

You will receive an email confirmation shortly at info@jcreortncasino.com

#### Reservation Detail:

3 Nights, All-Inclusive J.C. Resort & Casino Tampa, FL.



Total Price = \$500

Eligible Discount (0%) = \$0

Final Price = \$500

### Wait, you should join our donation program!

There is really no choice. Give something to children in need at pre-school/kindergarten age.



You should definitely donate more actively to help feed, educate, and empower children in need. With only a little government funding, children rely on people like you to keep going.

All you have to do is to share what you have whether it is time, money, foods, clothing, or books. You must donate as much as possible to bring hope to children at risk!



Price discount and nonassertive donation message (Study 2)

**All-Inclusive J.C. Resort & Casino  
Tampa, FL**



With the all-inclusive package, you can experience high-stakes excitement at a great value. You can sit back, relax, and enjoy the endless amenities with the best casinos in the world!

**3-Nights at \$ 500,**  
\*There are currently 40% (\$200) discount promotions available for you.  
**Now, 3 Nights at \$ 300**

**- Resort Activities**



**- Resort Amenities**



*J.C. Resort & Casino*

**Thank you for your reservation.**

Your reservation number is: 68453418454  
You will receive an email confirmation shortly at info@jcreortncasino.com

Reservation Detail:  
3 Nights, All-Inclusive J.C. Resort & Casino Tampa, FL.



Total Price = \$500  
Eligible Discount (40%) = \$200  
Final Price = \$300

**Wait, you can join our donation program!**

**The Choice is yours. You can give something** to children in need at pre-school/kindergarten age.



**You could definitely donate more actively** to help feed, educate, and empower children in need. With only a little government funding, children rely on people like you to keep going.

**You may want to share** what you have whether it is time, money, foods, clothing, or books. **It is worth donating** as much as possible to bring hope to children at risk!



**Appendix C (Study 3; Buy 1, Get 1 Free condition)**

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



**Assertive message**

**Nonassertive message**