



# An Evolutionary Psychology Approach to Sustainability

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## 1 How can evolutionary motivations be used to promote sustainable practices through advertising?

As the human species has evolved goals like attracting mates and caring for offspring have helped in passing on one's genes to future generations. Fundamental motives theory, a psychological theory, has found that priming these motivations leads people to act in predictable patterns of behavior. This research looks at how priming kinship, and status can influence people to act more sustainably.

These two evolutionary messages are compared to money-saving appeals, which have been the traditional way of promoting environmentally beneficial behaviors..

These messages are accompanied by a "target" person. We predict that the effectiveness of these messages will be affected by:

1. The sex of the target person in the ad
2. Participant characteristics such as sex, importance of sustainability, marital status, income
  - For example, a person who already has children might be influenced more by the ad inspiring kin care than someone who never wants children.

## 2 Advertisement:

Created from an SRP example ad. The first sentence of the ad was 1 of the 3 messages listed below, then pictured either a male or female target, and then listed the same script from the original ad about buying an Energy Smart home. Participants randomly saw 1 of the 6 versions .



## 3 Participant stats:

207 participants from a web survey system called Amazon Mechanical Turk were paid \$.05 for participating:

- 82 males and 121 females, 6 did not list gender
- average age was 36 but varied from 18-78
- predominantly Caucasian
- 82 with children, 116 did not have children

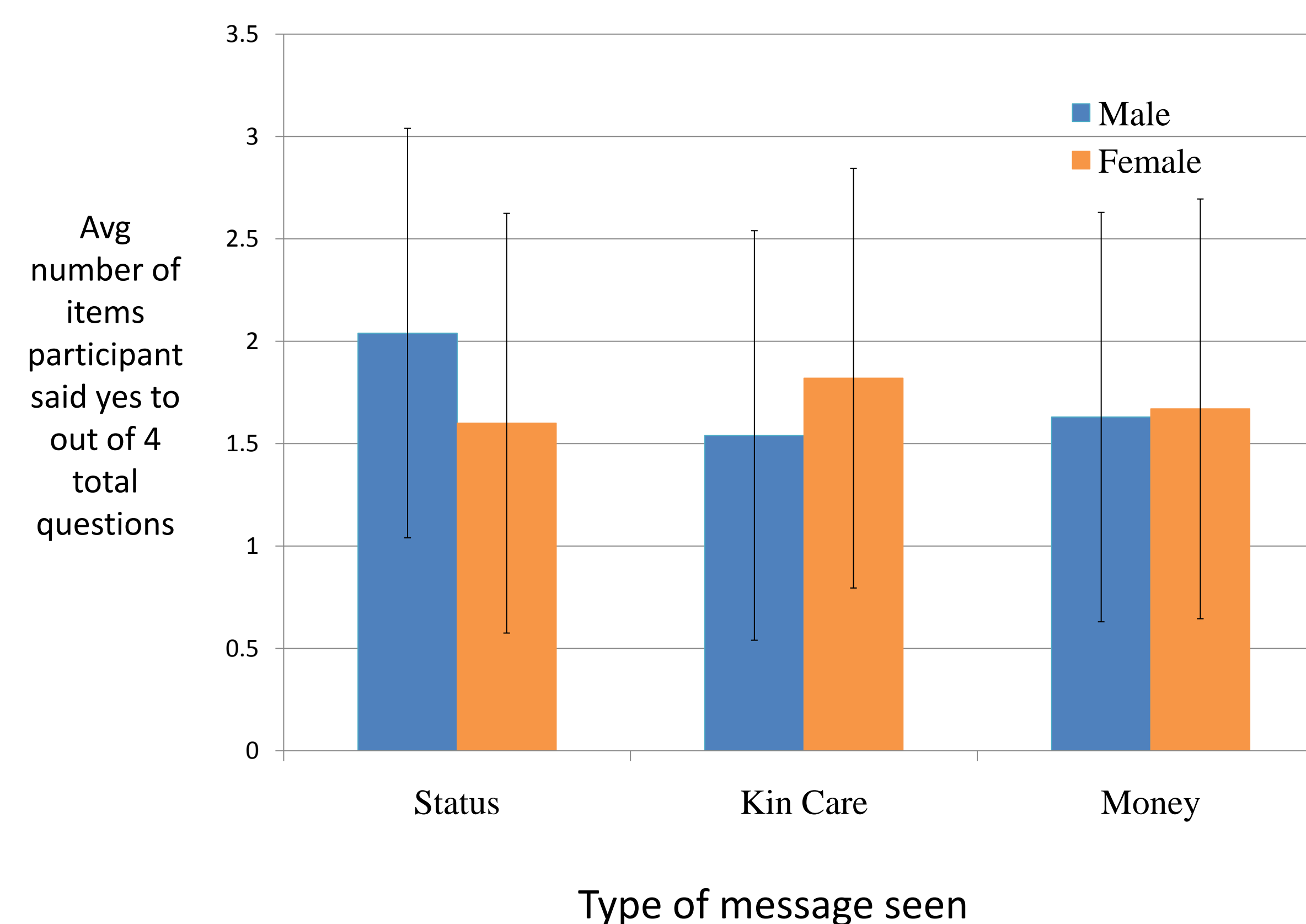
### Surveying Procedure:

Participants were randomly assigned to see one of six versions of the ad and then complete a questionnaire to assess their willingness to engage in sustainable behaviors.

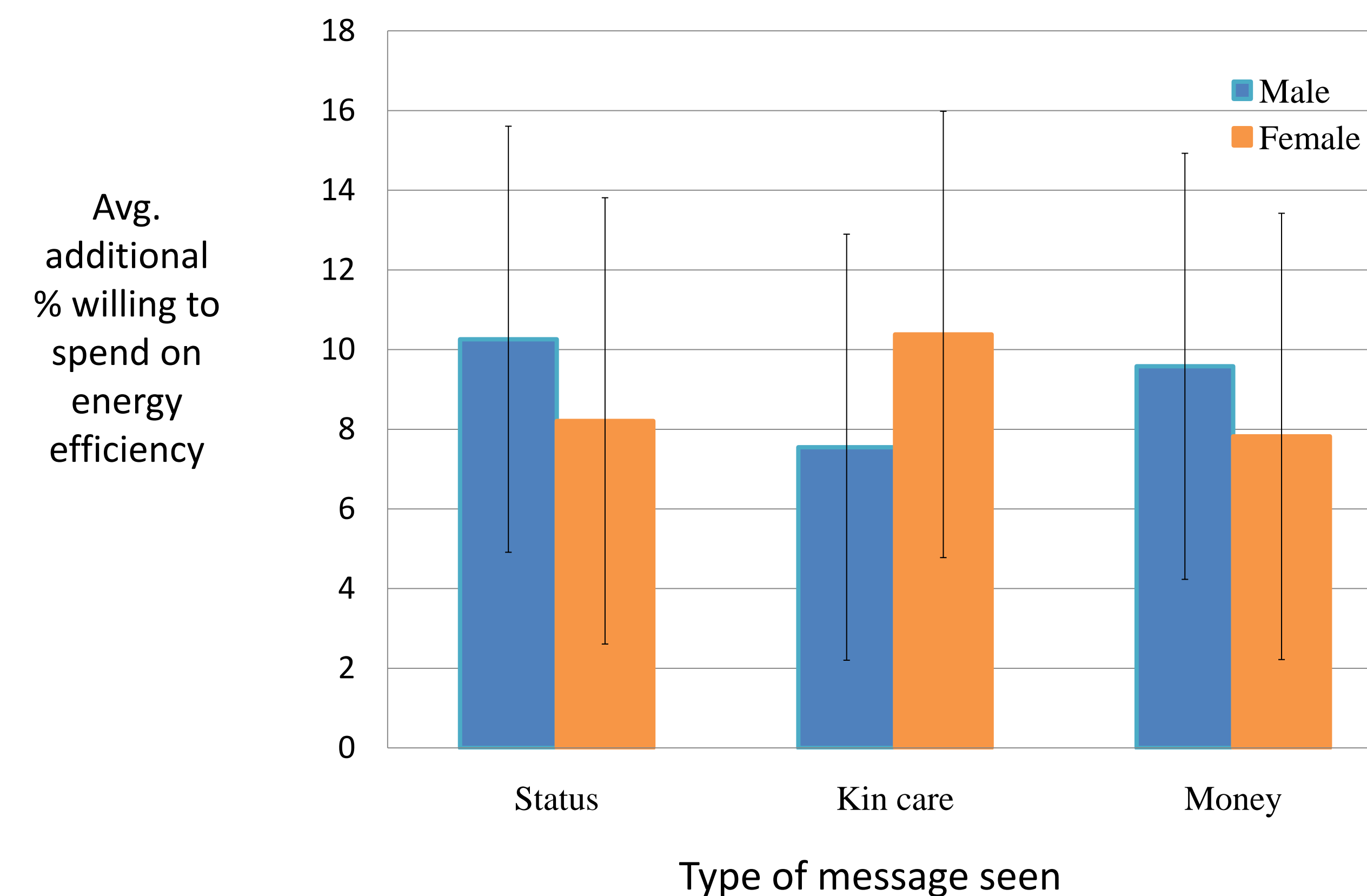
Sustainability was measured by their willingness to spend time encouraging sustainability, their commitment to sign petitions for energy efficiency, and how much money they would spend on a future home to make it energy and water efficient.

Questions also gathered information on participants' background characteristics.

## 4 Sex of target affects the number of items relating to energy and water conservation for which participants pledged.



## 5 Target sex made a significant difference for % participants were willing to spend on energy efficiency



## 6 Discussion

While hypothesis 2 (viewer characteristics affecting message effectiveness) was not confirmed with this study, we did find that **the kin-and status-related messages were just as effective if not more effective than the traditional saving-money-motivated ads** at getting people to act or support saving water and energy.

### Future Research

This research takes place in a broader set of studies to examine how fundamental motives theory can be used to promote sustainability and water conservation. This theory could be particularly useful in promoting sustainable practices that are expensive in the short-term where saving money cannot be appealed to as a motive. Additional studies will look at how to best target specific audiences based on this theory.

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