



# Promote me or protect us? The framing of policy for collective good

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The aim of this paper is to identify the best marketing communications for policy messages that makes these messages acceptable and fair to the public. Within the context of the Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax, this paper examines how framing messages through the alternative perspective of tribalism can increase individual support towards the corresponding policy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses a mixed methods approach. Study 1 uses a qualitative content analysis process based on grounded theory to identify the themes that surround 331 public comments on a transportation policy. Study 2 follows with two 2x2 quantitative factorial experiments to test specific hypotheses.

**Findings** – If messages are framed to address the collective losses of the political tribe for collective good, then they generate more favorable attitudes towards the policy, as opposed to the self-interest perspective.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper focuses on two political tribes: the collective good and self-interest. Additional research needs to address the other socially symbolic political tribes to develop the empirical research on the theory of tribalism.

**Practical implications** – The marketing of public policy based on traditional segmentation is limiting. Policy messages can be more salient if they are framed for the political consumption of the socially symbolic tribe.

**Originality/value** – A key contribution is that the paper is the first to use a mixed methods approach, with two studies that examine the effects of framing policy from a tribalism perspective.

**Keywords** Marketing communications, Political tribes, Tribalism,  
Socially symbolic political consumption, Public policy marketing, Message framing effects

**Paper type** Research paper



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## Introduction

One of the key roles of political marketing is to communicate public policy. The political science literature shows that differently framed political messages can influence the opinions and attitudes of the public (Lee and Chang, 2010; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987). Political marketing exercises this influence through the development, execution, and assessment of policy (Henneberg, 2008). Thus, the value of political marketing lies in its ability to gain public acceptance of the benefits of proposed legislative changes (Newman, 2002).

Although the marketing of public policy is a subdiscipline of the political marketing research, the majority of studies continue to focus mainly on political campaign marketing and the framing of issues (Drukman, 2001; Sparrow and Turner, 2001; Lovett and Shachar, 2011). Furthermore, recent commentary on political marketing research indicates that its knowledge development appears stagnant and lacking (Butler and Harris, 2009). Henneberg (2008) further suggests that more research that complements the conceptual literature with empirical research is needed to focus on understanding voter behavior in marketing terms. Although an ongoing debate exists with regard to the view that voters resemble consumers (Lock and Harris, 1996; Peng and Hackley, 2009), researchers appear to agree, given that context should be taken into account, that this analogy does merit consideration.

Furthermore, Dermody and Scullion (2001) argue that the traditional view of marketing segmentation methods might not be sufficient. The authors suggest that political marketing communications might benefit more by understanding that individuals belong to micro-groups identified by their shared political lifestyles and values. This concept, called tribalism, centers on the idea of linking individuals together by way of their political consumption rather than simply through traditional marketing such as socio-demographic segmentation. Cova and Cova (2002) further elaborate on the tribalism perspective not as a replacement to traditional marketing but as an alternative and perhaps augmentative approach to investigate marketing methods that are not currently being practiced in mainstream marketing.

The goal of our research is to convey meaningful insights to policymakers as to the best ways to frame necessary policy messages so as to make them acceptable and fair to the public. To do this, we examine policy communication strategies through the alternative perspective of tribalism's concept of linking values. We then use the data gained through our qualitative study on linking values and apply it to an experimental setting to examine the effects of message framing within a political policy context. Thus, our main contribution is applying the conceptualization of tribalism to form the relevant frames to empirically examine the effects on the public's acceptance of a policy.

Our paper begins with a theoretical base that is a combination of tribalism and framing theory. Following this discussion, we provide a brief description and background on the study context, the Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax. Next, we describe our first study, a qualitative one that uses 331 public comments to identify the two political tribes. We then design a second study, a quantitative experiment that examines whether framing messages targeted towards their appropriate political tribes might provide a more salient communication strategy for public policy. Finally, our discussion and conclusion includes implications for managers of public policy marketing by considering the perspective of tribalism and the framing of goals with our suggestions for future research.

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### Theoretical framework and hypotheses development

Our research combines two theories to form our conceptual framework: tribalism and framing. Our contention is that by combining the insights from these two theories, we can propose a better mechanism by which policymakers can effectively communicate public policy to their constituents.

#### *Tribalism theory*

The tribalism perspective, also known as the “Latin view,” (Cova and Cova, 2002) proposes that micro-groups are created through shared tastes and lifestyles. Tribes are defined as “a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are linked by a shared passion or emotion; a tribe is capable of collective action, its members are not simple consumers, they are also advocates” (Cova and Cova, 2002, p. 602). In contrast, from a traditional marketing perspective, a market segment is a homogenous group identified through similar characteristics but not necessarily capable of collective action and not connected to one another through shared emotions or actions. From a public policy perspective, communications targeted towards tribes, rather than traditional socio-demographic segments, allow for the messages to go beyond obviously visual characteristics to characteristics or values that are unseen. Thus, policy messages can be more salient if targeted towards an individual’s socially symbolic, political consumption.

Primarily from a qualitative perspective, researchers continue to explore consumers as members of tribes based on their tribal commonalities, for instance, with studies discussing brand tribes (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009), e-tribes or virtual communities (Kozinets, 2006), and ethnocentric tribal bias (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012). As Cova and Pace (2006) indicate, this tribal view of the consumer is critical to the study of marketing in that the view centers on the consumer as an empowered individual. Moreover, this tribal view embraces the idea that consumers not only interact with a flat marketplace, but that they also extend it, make it their own, and essentially re-invent it through their tribes.

#### *Framing theory*

Dermody and Scullion (2001) propose that individuals’ shared values of politics are symbolically meaningful indirectly through their tribal affiliation and can validate their self-identity. The framing of a message can define or limit its meaning by shaping an individual’s inferences from the message (Hallahan, 1999). Thus, the framing is selected for the purpose of making the message more salient to the particular target of interest. Indeed, how to frame a public policy issue is a necessary component of political communications (Lee and Chang, 2010).

One of the theoretical underpinnings of message framing comes from prospect theory that is defined as an individual’s tendency to prefer avoiding losses more than acquiring gains (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). In their study, they find that two logically equivalent statements of a problem lead to different options chosen by decision makers. Public policy manipulates framing by stressing values or facts with apparent relevance to an issue (Lee and Chang, 2010).

Goal framing is a particular method of positioning informational messages as choice options that represent gains or losses (Levin *et al.*, 1998). Frames that represent gains are positive frames whereas those that represent losses are negative frames. Both

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positive and negative goal framing can be used to persuade in the same (intended) direction (Cesario *et al.*, 2004). When dealing with public policy, the focus of framing is not to determine how individuals might change their attitude depending on the general versus specific framing of the issue; rather, whether more persuasion can occur from a gain versus a loss perspective. For example, within the context of tax compliance, Holler *et al.* (2008) illustrate that the effectiveness of goal framing is dependent upon the individual's internal focus (either promotion or prevention based). This dependence suggests that framing from a gain (positive) or loss (negative) perspective that is targeted towards behavioral characteristics might be more salient for the intended recipient. In addition, the information processing perspective supports the idea that negative information receives greater weight and requires more processing than positive information (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001). Furthermore, negative information attracts more attention from the recipient than positive information (Pratto and John, 1991). For example, consumers report an increased willingness to buy private brands when presented with loss (negative) oriented messages than with gain (positive) oriented messages (Gamliel and Herstein, 2007).

#### *Hypotheses development*

Consistent with prior research on goal framing in which losses are processed more carefully than gains, we expect to find that negative goal framing is likely to be more effective than positive goal framing when examining a single public policy issue. From a public policy perspective, a natural conflict is evident in public choice theory that assumes individuals should act in their own best interest rather than the public interest (Self, 1993).

However, many individuals do not always act in their own interest, but instead act in the collective interest of others (Brewer and Kraemer, 1986) and exhibit prosocial behavior. For example, in Jaakkola and Alexander (2011), the community (tribal) engagement in an "adopt a station" program helps improve the environment for rail users at the station, a collective good. Brewer (1979) argues that the salience of the collective identity might place more weight on collective gains than on individual gains. Likewise, we contend that more weight might be placed on collective losses than individual losses when attitudes are most salient to the collective outcomes. Therefore, more weight might be placed on collective losses for those that identify with prosocial attitudes than those who predominantly have an attitude of self-interest. This weight specifically resonates with the concept of an individual's socially symbolic political consumption that is tied to their tribe, and embodies a linking value to the collective good through the individual's prosocial attitude or action.

For effective policy implementation, government must not only understand public attitudes towards policy, but must also weigh the effects of how the messages of policy information are framed (McCaffery and Baron, 2004). Although consumers can be grouped through their similar linking values, the tribalism perspective augments this idea by also identifying them through their tribal role and affiliation. As Cova and Cova (2002) illustrate, tribal members can adopt four roles: membership (e.g. associations, religious groups), participation (e.g. demonstrations), participating in everyday tribal activities, and sympathizing. In particular, the role of the practitioner is underpinned through Maffesoli's (1996, p. xi) suggestion that "people with the same lifestyle and affinity of habitus may share the same politics of everyday life."

Therefore, based on this description, we focus our efforts on understanding the effects of negative goal framing within the tribalism perspective identified through the role of an everyday prosocial activity; our hypothesis, then, is that this similar lifestyle is reflective of one's political tribal affiliation. We hypothesize the following:

$H_1$  Negatively framed messages are more effective when the prosocial activity associates to a linking value of a collective good.

Furthermore, Dermody and Scullion (2001) conceptualize that political participation might have an impact on the linking value ascertained from socially symbolic political consumption. Environmental political activism is related to an individual's environmental value orientation and therefore, from a tribalism perspective, can strengthen the individual's linking value. Because of this value, environmentally minded political action recipients of messages are more likely to place greater value and pay more attention to messages that relate towards environmental collective losses than gains. Because Diamantopoulos *et al.* (2003) identify the individual's environmental consciousness as consistent with the individual's prosocial behavior, it is reasonable to examine the link between political activism and similar tribal values. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

$H_2$  Negatively framed messages are more effective when the activity of environmental political activism is associated with the linking value of a collective good.

In study 1, we seek to identify key differences between the two tribes of self-interest and collective good. To do so, we take a real world sample of 331 comments volunteered by public constituents and semantically analyze them with a two-step process. In this study, we delineate these two tribes and determine similar linking values between them, ones we can use to identify key constructs for our follow-up quantitative study. In our second study, we test our hypotheses by means of a quantitative experiment that examines attitudes towards a public transportation policy using tribalism through an environmental political activism perspective. We contend that the combination of our two theory bases, tribalism and framing, will show us a clear pathway of how to approach the public to help form a "protect us" mindset as opposed to a "promote me" one within the consumer.

## Study 1

### *Study context*

The context of the public policy communication in this research is a transportation policy called the Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax. The National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission (NSTIFC) recently recommended a VMT program as a viable solution to meet the infrastructure needs in the US (NSTIFC, 2009). The VMT program is a direct means of charging a fee (tax) for each mile driven as opposed to the current indirect method of paying taxes based on fuel consumption. The primary reason for the recommendation is that the indirect method is no longer sufficient to cover the increasing infrastructure expenses. In part, this budget gap is due to more fuel efficient cars on the road while the requirements for structural maintenance and repair continue to grow. In Europe, many countries have implemented various versions of VMT policies for similar reasons. For example, in

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Germany, heavy-vehicle (over 12 tons) drivers are charged by the number of kilometer miles driven (NSTIFC, 2009). Additionally, the Dutch government announced plans to charge a tax for all miles driven beginning in 2012. In the US, Oregon implemented a pilot program and other states are considering implementing a VMT policy as well.

Although there is a critical need for this tax, current public reactions appear to suggest a reluctance to support fuel tax rates and fees (NSTIFC, 2009). Generally, feelings towards taxes of any type are mostly negative (Kirchler, 2007). However, because people tend to understand that taxes are used for the common good, paying taxes creates a social dilemma between the individual's self-interest and the collective interests of society (Holler *et al.*, 2008). The VMT is a tax that is used to help the government to maintain the transportation infrastructure, a public good, and to support a sustainable environment. However, individuals who drive are the only contributors to a VMT tax; while those who do not drive or take public transportation do not pay a tax, but still benefit. This conflict is evident within the perspective provided by public choice theory that assumes that individuals should act in their own best interest above the public interest (Self, 1993). Hence, drivers might have a negative attitude towards paying a VMT tax. The social dilemma of tax policy resonates between two distinct values-based tribes (Kozinets, 2006). The first is self-interest (i.e. a "me" perspective) whose understanding of tax policy is primarily based upon how the tax might benefit them; the second group, the collective good, is of the understanding that the tax might not benefit them directly but is more for the common good of society (i.e. a "we" perspective). Indeed, Maffesoli (1996, p. 81) states in metaphorical prose that a tribe is like a 'thread of reciprocity' from which everyday actions and situations are woven through individuals to form a whole. The daily action of commuting in the car provides the basis of 'being together' that is fundamental to understanding the existence of different tribes rallying around their shared values in relation to specific tax policies and the impact on the area's roads and infrastructure.

### *Methodology*

In order to encourage an open communication forum with the public, policymakers create forums within which the public can make comments and stay engaged in the decision process. This participation by the public allows for the two-way communication and the feedback to the government about the issues, ideas, and the suggestions that might not otherwise be voiced. However, such information can remain unanalyzed or perhaps inadequately tapped as a resource for fruitful information.

Our first study analyzes the textual information provided by the public constituents in Nevada with regards to the VMT tax proposed by the NDOT. In order to elicit public feedback, the NDOT actively provided public communication forums of two types: public meetings and electronic communication. The public meetings generated 251 verbal comments that were later transcribed. The NDOT also received 80 emails, along with website comments from the public regarding the tax.

### *Procedure and analysis*

The public feedback from both sources follows a pattern similar to netnographic data, such as blog entries, in the sense that each comment differs in length and contribution and consists of a completely voluntary discussion (Kozinets, 2002). Hence, to conceptualize the contextual data, we engage in a grounded theory approach that



follows a two-step process. This process, also known as a constant comparative method of analysis (Spiggle, 1994), involves iterating through data collection and existing a priori theory while allowing for emergent interpretation (Goulding, 2005). In our first step, we use the tribal framework that identifies self-interest versus the collective good as the two key categories for coding the qualitative data. For studying the concepts and ideas outlined by these two tribes, we asked three trained researchers to independently serve as content analysis coders (Reynolds and Arnold, 2000) to classify each comment as one of these two tribal themes. To ensure the reliability of the categorizing, two researchers separately code the responses and the third researcher resolves any differences in coding. The key themes in the coding are concepts such as “me, mine, myself” for the self-interest tribe comments versus “we, our, unite” for the collective-good tribe comments. Sample comments for both tribes are in Table I.

The second step consists of comparing these two sets of comments through lexicographic content analysis software, called Leximancer. Leximancer ([www.leximancer.com](http://www.leximancer.com)) uses a machine learning technique to discover the concepts and

Self-interest	Collective good
Since I live on private dirt roads, the first seven miles and last seven miles of any trip I make are on roads that I pay for through home owners' assessments. No one should be charging me for those miles – so how we gonna fix that one guys?	People have already figured out how to disable their odometers. This will just encourage more people to do that and find ways to get around your fee
I think the idea of a mandatory black box stinks. I don't like the idea that my driving habits would be tracked by anyone even if the results are kept private. I would prefer either a flat tax paid with registration fees or some kind of mileage tax paid quarterly or semiannually	You are going to charge extra for traveling during certain high traffic times? Well people go and from work when their employer tells them to be there. Unlike politicians who make these unrealistic decisions, we cannot tell our employer when we will be at work. They tell us so we travel back and forth when we have to... not when traffic is slower
Enough is enough on taxing us. I am a retired school teacher and barely making it as it is. How dare you increase the taxes I am already paying and basing it on the mileage I drive my car. Shame on you – My family originally moved to Nevada because of the tax advantages. This is unacceptable under any conditions	GPS won't happen. A government attempt to install one in my car would be met by force. So forgetting that, let's go by “miles driven.” We live in Reno. How many miles do you drive in California? If you're like me, a lot. And how about us with 4x4 who spend a great deal of time on dirt roads? Do you honestly believe anyone in this state is going to go through the paperwork of separating out pavement miles from dirt miles? (Trucking companies already do this, it's a pain in the butt)
I also take issue with vehicle weight being used as a penalty. I drive a full-size pickup because that is all I have. I should not have to pay more because it's weight is an issue. Build the road to support the weight of all vehicles but don't penalize me for what I drive	People are hard hit with the current economic situation and live paycheck to paycheck. Sure you will lower the current gas tax but now what, we show up at the DMS top renew our registration and all of a sudden we owe hundreds of dollars. Many just won't have it so again we have more people just figuring out ways to buck they system

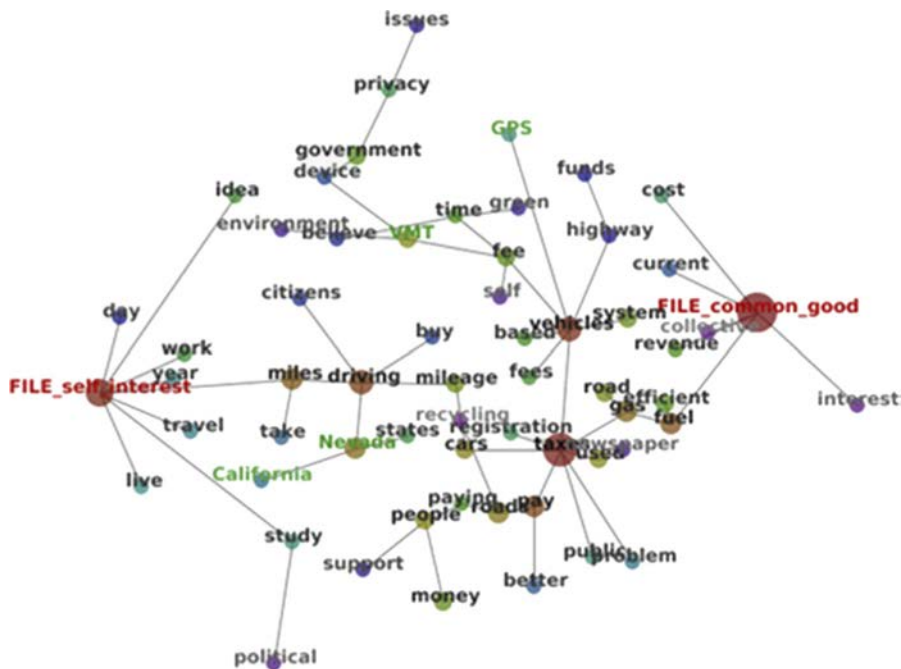
**Table I.**  
Study 1 sample  
comments coded into  
tribes

themes within verbal data (Smith, 2007). Several fields in social science, including marketing, advertising, and accounting, use Leximancer to analyze textual data (e.g. Campbell *et al.*, 2011; Rooney, 2005). The Leximancer algorithm, based on Bayesian theory, derives concepts and themes that in general conform to those derived by qualitative researchers (Rooney, 2005). Because our quest for this study is purely exploratory, Leximancer is appropriate and does not rely on human coding of text during the second step, which allows for an iterative process to retrieve themes (Atkinson, 1992).

*Results*

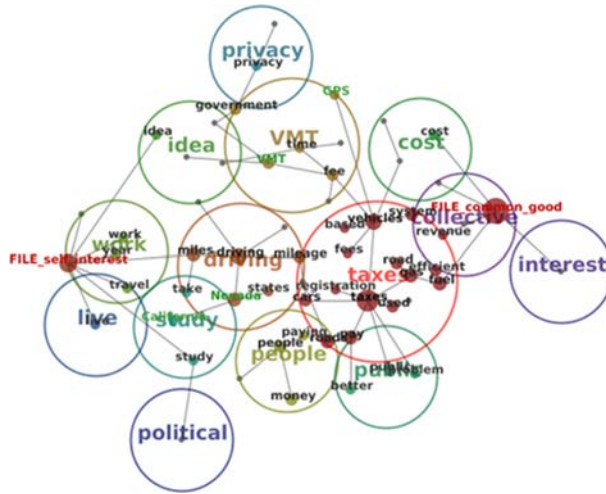
Leximancer allows us to create concept maps. Researchers can then interpret these maps and derive any key ideas from them.

As predicted by tribal theory, Figures 1 and 2 shows that these two tribes display very different thematic concepts. Inclusion of key terms for one tribe indicates the lack of inclusion for the other. From a cursory look, the collective good tribe is surrounded by concepts like interest, collective, public, people, taxes, and cost. Note that the words collective, interest, and people all revolve around the interest in others as opposed to simple self-interest. On the other hand, the self-interest tribe is connected with concepts such as work, live, study, driving, and political. In the case of the self-interest tribe, the collective concepts are not present, and the key semantic terms deal more with self-related concepts. However, Leximancer not only produces concept maps, but also derives correlations between concepts. These correlations allow for a more detailed understanding of the two tribes and provide key information for our follow-up quantitative study. The correlations between key concepts in this verbal data are in Table II. In addition to the correlations, we calculate the Fisher's r-to-z



**Figure 1.**  
Study 1 comparison of  
self-interest and collective  
good perspectives





**Figure 2.**  
Study 1 concept map for  
self-interest versus  
collective good tribes

transformation[1] as well as the significance level of the difference between the two correlations to provide a comparison, because they apply to two different tribes (Völkner and Hofmann, 2007).

*Discussion*

Our mixed methods approach to the idea of the framing of VMT communications begins with a qualitative exploration of the public comments. Table II shows that the concepts of environment, green, and political show significant differences across these two sets of comments, but privacy and issues do not. These differences provide a starting point for a second quantitative experimental study. As a result of seeing the importance of the differences between environment and green for the two populations, we now study the prosocial behavior by using the construct of recycling behavior as a proxy. To address the differences in political, we also study the political activism construct. We contend that people who recycle make a statement with respect to the collective good because recycling is good for the environment and benefits all of society. Although recycling as an activity is seemingly mundane, McCarty and Shrum (2001) find that the value orientation of collectivism is related to recycling behavior. Recycling and political activism are examples of shared emotions and activities that define different segments of the population through the tribalism lens.

Correlation between concepts	Self-interested (n = 113)	Collective good (n = 218)	Fisher's r-to-z transformation	p-value
Privacy	0.45	0.43	0.21	ns
Environment	0.36	0.67	-3.7	0.00
Issues	0.36	0.41	-0.50	ns
Green	0.39	0.66	-3.25	0.00
Political	0.57	0.21	3.71	0.00

**Table II.**  
Study 1 concept correlations

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## Study 2

### *Experimental design and participants*

Study 2 uses a between-subjects experimental design to test each hypothesis. The independent variable of VMT Goal Framing is manipulated as either positive or negative with the second independent variable of interest Recycling tendency for *H1* or Political Activism for *H2*. The second independent variable's conditions of low or high are determined using a median split (median = 4 for both recycling tendency and political activism).

### *Subjects and procedure*

Both undergraduate and graduate students from a large commuter-based student body at a Nevada university serve as participants for this experiment. Multiple sections of different classes are used, and students are randomly assigned to various experimental conditions. Student sampling has been used in marketing research before, in particular, for causal experiments based on scenarios (Rana and Brett, 2011; Pham and Avnet, 2004; Antioco and Kleijnen, 2010). A total of 120 surveys (55 female, 63 male, two do not report gender; the mean age is 26 years old) are collected. All participant identification information and responses are kept confidential throughout the study. Subjects receive a printed packet with a cover story for the experiment that explains that they are participating in a study of a VMT tax system. They read a short scenario (see the Appendix) regarding a VMT system and respond to the "questions with regard to the scenarios." This study also includes visual representations to reinforce the positive and negative manipulations. Participants are also asked to respond to an item designed as a manipulation check of whether they read and understood the scenario. The item, "The scenario you read claims that by using a vehicle mile taxation plan, which one is more likely to occur?" precedes a semantic differential scale that ranges from: 1 equals "The threat of restrictions in our infrastructure can be avoided," and 7 equals "The ability to have improvements in our infrastructure can be maintained." To determine whether the VMT goal-framing independent variable is effective, one of the survey items asks about the scenario. The results of a one-sample *t*-test show that subjects in the positive versus negative framing conditions are aware of the wording in the messages. Specifically, the magnitudes of the means are significantly above the neutral point for the seven-point scale ( $M_{\text{negative}} = 4.71$ ;  $M_{\text{positive}} = 5.23$ ;  $t(120) = 6.49$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Following the scenario-specific questions, subjects respond to a survey consisting of multiple item scales. Construct development yields reliable scales for attitude to VMT (negative/positive, unfavorable/favorable, dislike/like;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ), recycling tendency (recycle paper, recycle glass, recycle plastics, recycle metals;  $\alpha = 0.89$ ), political activism (support of environmental pressure groups, support of lobbying the government about green issues, support of writing to newspapers about green issues, and support of boycotting companies that are not environmentally responsible,  $\alpha = 0.81$ ). Both recycling tendency and political activism are adapted from Bohlen *et al.* (1993). More recent research has used both of these scales and shows them to be methodologically sound (Diamantopoulos *et al.*, 2003). Last, participants complete other demographic questions that include: whether they own a car (116 = yes; 4 = no) and, if so what is the primary purpose for their transportation (42.9 percent for work, 8.4 percent for leisure, and 40.3 percent for everything); prior familiarity with the concept of a VMT system ( $M = 3.23$ ); their age; and their gender. Regarding car

ownership, all subjects are required to have a driver's license in order to participate in the study. Gender and age served as covariates in our analysis.

*Results*

A between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with planned contrasts is used to analyze the data for *H1* and *H2*.

*H1 test.* A univariate ANOVA discloses that those who view the negatively framed message ( $M = 3.47$ ) have a significantly higher attitude towards VMT than those who view the positively framed message ( $M = 2.93$ ), ( $F(1, 114) = 4.07, p = 0.05$ ). As per *H1*, planned comparisons show that, for those who receive the negative VMT goal-framing condition, subjects with a higher recycling tendency tend to have significantly higher attitudes towards the VMT ( $M = 3.65$ ) than those who have a lower recycling tendency ( $M = 3.28$ ), ( $F(1, 114) = 4.14, p = 0.04$ ). The interaction of Recycling and VMT goal-framing is not significant ( $F(1, 114) = 0.75, ns$ ) (Table III)

*H2 test.* A univariate ANOVA discloses that those who view the negatively framed message ( $M = 3.47$ ) have a significantly higher attitude towards the VMT than those who view the positively framed message ( $M = 2.93$ ), ( $F(1, 114) = 4.29, p = 0.04$ ). The results also show that, for political action, those with higher political activism have significantly higher attitudes to VMT ( $M = 3.58$ ) than those with low political activism ( $M = 2.83$ ), ( $F(1, 114) = 8.18, p = 0.01$ ). As per *H2*, planned comparisons show that, for those who receive the negative VMT goal-framing condition, subjects with higher political activism tend to have significantly higher attitudes towards VMT ( $M = 3.95$ ) than those who have lower political activism ( $M = 3.00$ ), ( $F(1, 114) = 6.59, p = 0.01$ ). The interaction of political activism and VMT goal-framing is not significant ( $F(1, 114) = 0.43, ns$ ) (see Table IV)

*Discussion*

Our paper addresses a very important problem, namely how to create effective public policy communications to increase the awareness and support for them by using a tribalism lens to target behavioral segments that have a linking value. Unlike traditional segmentation where the groups are identified based upon visual characteristics, the tribalism perspective is affiliated with identifying groups that link together via shared values and actions. This linkage can lead to newer insights

VMT goal-framing	Recycling tendency	
	Low recycling	High recycling
<i>Negative</i>		
Mean	3.28	3.65
SE	(0.27)	(0.27)
<i>n</i>	29	30
<i>Positive</i>		
Mean	2.97	2.88
SE	(0.26)	(0.27)
<i>n</i>	31	30

**Table III.**  
Study 2 *H1* estimated marginal means of attitude to VMT with covariates

**Note:** Covariates in the model are evaluated at these values: Age = 26.08; Gender = 1.53

VMT goal-framing	Political activism	
	Low political activism	High political activism
<i>Negative</i>		
Mean	3.00	3.95
SE	(0.26)	(0.26)
<i>n</i>	30	29
<i>Positive</i>		
Mean	2.66	3.21
SE	(0.25)	(0.26)
<i>n</i>	31	30

**Note:** Covariates in the model are evaluated at these values: Age = 26.08; Gender = 1.53

**Table IV.**  
Study 2  $H_2$  estimated marginal means of attitude to VMT with covariates

with regards to targeted messaging campaigns that are more salient to the links that matter (Cova, 1999). We show that the greater likelihood of prosocial behaviors such as recycling and environmental political activism lead to higher attitudes towards a VMT, especially when framed negatively. This finding is due to the salience of the message for those recipients that have shared values and actions leading them to respond well to the threat of collective losses. There are two important implications to our research. First, our findings are consistent with the research that shows that loss aversion tends to be more effective when framing inherently unwanted information (e.g. Gamliel and Herstein, 2007). Second, that the set of behaviors that we identify do not readily map to a traditional segment, and instead form a tribe of constituents from which public policy messages can be marketed in much the same way as a tribe formed around a brand such as a Nutella community (Cova and Pace, 2006). Our suggestion that the consumer tribes perspective will be more appropriate than a traditional segmentation approach comes from the idea that environmentally conscious behavior is by nature socially constructed and fluid. Communicating public policy messages that leverage the linking value that binds a tribe together is essential for gathering support for a policy.

### Conclusions

One of the main contributions of this research is the application of the conceptualization of tribalism to form the relevant frames to empirically examine the effects of goal framing on the public acceptance of a policy. We use the mixed methods or triangulation approach in this application (Sobh and Perry, 2006), which clearly leads to both theoretical as well as empirical insights. Triangulation is defined as, "... the purposive gathering of multiple sources of data ..." by using a mixed methods approach, that is, both qualitative and quantitative forms of inquiry (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007, p. 63). First, a qualitative grounded theory with an iterative process leads the analysis of verbal data from public constituents. Following this analysis, key themes highlight the differences in shared values and activities between the two behavioral tribes of interest. These differences form the constructs of relevance for the framing of the information on the VMT tax for the public as our quantitative research effort. We choose to frame our work from the tribalism perspective in part because subcultures of consumption tend to emanate from social classes, and tend to be fixed, whereas tribes are defined to be socially constructed and fluid (Bennett, 1999). As

such, our research promotes the idea of socially symbolic tribes through which to frame messages. The inherent problem of promoting the “better good” of an obviously negative consequence such as taxation makes tailored messages even more critical.

From a substantive view, the findings from this research indicate and confirm that recycling is considered to have social benefits as opposed to individual benefits. Environmental political activism focuses on the better good for all. In line with this concept, the combination of our two studies shows that a prosocial behavior, recycling tendency, and environmental political activism seem to follow a similar relation with attitudes towards VMT. We contend that this idea extends from the tribalism theory in which the behavioral segmentation should provide much better insights on public opinion with regards to VMT campaigns.

### **Research implications**

Scholars identify one facet of the broad field of *political marketing* to address the important need to market policy changes to the public, and have “. . . proposed areas for empirical research work” (Osugwu, 2008, p. 807). Theoretical and empirical contributions to the field of political marketing are scant (Newman, 2002), so we propose our work as a contribution to this literature. Our research builds on the political marketing literature by blending consumer behavior theory with an empirical approach and researching an important and substantive domain, transportation taxation. We argue that by targeting transportation messages from a tribalism perspective, we leverage the linking values of constituents and acknowledge the impact of the internet on postmodern consumers (Simmons, 2008). These constituents then have a tendency to share collectivistic values or actions that allow for the application of the framing theory. Our findings show that the negative goal messages that focus on the collective losses lead to an increase in attitudes towards policy-based transportation communications. In particular, we empirically validate our ideas through findings for two independent but tribally linked behaviors, namely recycling and environmental political activism.

Perhaps the traditional segmentation techniques are not relevant because they require a reciprocal exchange between the company and the consumer, whereas in public policy marketing the exchange is between the government and the citizen. The political marketing literature allows us to synthesize theoretically supported suggestions to gain a more in-depth understanding of market-oriented voter behavior and to empirically test our research questions. As Shachar (2009) suggests, based on a model of several years of presidential election data, political marketing has a massive impact on turnout in close elections. Recognizing the need to approach political marketing from a consumer-centric approach, public governments can use tribalism as a marketing tool to adapt the requirements to public administration (Buurma, 2001). Similarly, incorporating consumer behavior theories such as understanding how people engage in collective behaviors can provide governments with information as to how citizens perceive policy implementation (Henneberg, 2008).

### **Future research and limitations**

However, our results are subject to limitations. First, for our second study, our participants are recruited through a selective student sample wherein experimental conditions are randomly assigned that could lead to less generalizability than a more

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random probabilistic one. Future research might benefit from a sample of the population that is more representative of the city, county, or state demographics. Although political tribalism includes several archetypes, our research focuses on two dichotomous tribes: collective good and self-interest. Future research can explore the concept of political tribalism through some sort of empirical framework in an attempt to develop a political tribalism taxonomy that can build on the existing theory.

Future research in the area of the framing of VMT messages can also explore the relation of moderator variables, such as involvement or perceived risk that might influence the persuasive effect of negatively (or positively) framed messages on attitudes to VMT. Further studies are also needed to identify individual and collective key values as they relate to VMT. For example, we surmise that an individual's need for privacy might exert a significant influence on taxation views, especially when the proposed taxation might require the tracking of miles traveled. The research on cell phone consumption shows that the need for privacy is a key construct that is useful for building consumer trust (Jayawardhena *et al.*, 2009). Thus, the political tribalism perspective would require that political marketing communications respect a consumer's need for privacy and underscore the features of a taxation policy that ensures it. Once understood, future research should also examine circumstances under which framing effects are most relevant. For example, is framing most effective when there is a fit between individual (collective) needs and individual (collective) outcomes? Also, Boldero and Higgins (2011) examine the role of the regulatory focus in the realm of political decision making and status quo versus reform, showing that eager rather than vigilant strategies can be more effective to trigger citizens to accept change. Combining their results with ours, future experimental studies can delineate eager versus vigilant strategies to promote prosocial behaviors. Our research can also be expanded to determine ways in which cross-cultural differences influence socially symbolic communications. Because VMT is a tax focused on those that will use the roads, future research should aim to develop a more in-depth understanding of the importance of road use and its relation to the individual tax compliance and attitudes. Finally, we apply a tribalism perspective to an empirical domain of VMT taxation policy; to broaden our findings, we suggest that future studies use other empirical and ethnographic methods to study actual consumers in both experimental and natural settings.

#### Note

1. The Fisher r-to-z transformation calculation provides the significance of the difference between the two correlation coefficients. The calculator is available at: <http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/rdiff.html>

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### Further reading

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Promote me or  
protect us?

VMT Goal Framing	Scenario
1. Positive (Beginning paragraph plus this part)	Sufficient tax revenues allow the state to <i>further expand and improve infrastructure</i> (e.g., roads and railways). If we base gas prices on each individual vehicle use, the ability to have improvements in the infrastructure <i>can be maintained</i>
	
2. Negative (Beginning paragraph plus this part)	A lack of tax revenues may lead to a cutback on the transportation system. As a further consequence of lacking tax revenues the state is <i>unable to expand and improve infrastructure</i> (e.g., roads and railways). If we base gas prices on each individual vehicle use, the threat of restrictions in our infrastructure <i>can be avoided</i>
	

**Figure A1.**  
Study 2 framing  
manipulation