

# Climate Change Awareness: An Explorative Study on the Discursive Construction of Ethical Consumption in a Communication Campaign

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**Abstract** The recent interest of the European Commission about the issues of ethical consumption and protection of the environment carried out the creation of Climate Change Awareness Campaign. The launch of the campaign was in 2006, throughout the 25 member states to raise awareness of climate change and the positive role that citizens can play in figuring it. There are strong indications, in several countries, that many consumers are switching towards more socially and environmentally responsible products and services, reflecting a shift in consumer values. The aim of this explorative study is to investigate the discursive construction of ethical awareness which would guide actual ethical consumption behaviour with reference to a communication campaign. Indeed, though scientific literature as already pointed out the efficacy of persuasive communication in social public campaign appealing at ethical issues, little is known about what happens between the fruition of the campaign and attitude and behavioural consumption. Participants to the study, a sample of university students were asked to examine one of the videos of the Climate Change Awareness Campaign promoted and broadcast by the European Commission, as to investigate their social representation of ethical consumption, arguing that this could act as interpretative repertoire of their attitude toward ethical consumption. Focus group discussion was used as methodological tool. Main results, implication and further development were discussed.

**Keywords:** *critical consumption, European Commission, advertising, persuasion*

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## 1. Introduction

The understanding that global climate change represents a profound threat to the health and well-being of human and nonhuman species worldwide is growing. Actually, public understanding of global warming is treated here as a mass communication problem that has yet to be adequately solved. Surveys of public understanding of this and other environmental problems typically find understanding to be lacking, while studies of media effects conclude that media have little or no effect, or even that they contribute to misunderstanding [1,2].

Communication, both mass and interpersonal, holds the key to improvement in public understanding of environmental problems. However, previous research often holds mass media responsible for public inadequacies. Content analysts typically find gaps in media coverage due to episodic coverage of dramatic events, and to focusing superficially on human interest and economic impacts, while overlooking systemic concerns. Such findings give rise to the inference that public understanding mirrors the inadequacies of media coverage, an inference that has occasionally been

supported by studies that have tried to document media effects more directly. Despite these shortcomings, the extensive media coverage of environmental problems is not entirely a futile effort. Agenda-setting studies show that media coverage is at least partly responsible for focusing people's attention on environmental problems.

Moving from such premises, this paper aimed at examining the potential of communication and marketing interventions to influence population behavior in ways consistent with climate change prevention and adaptation objectives. A critical discursive approach was adopted both in theory and methodology as to highlight how public communication campaign could contribute to develop representations that are discursively exchanged with the social context and that consequently could co-construct socially shared representations of what is good and what is bad with reference to the topic of investigation.

## 2. Mass Media Coverage and the Discursive Construction of Public Awareness of Climate Change

The media have a crucial responsibility as a source of information and opinions about ethical consumption [3].

Public perception and attitudes with regard to those domains are significantly influenced by representations of scientific knowledge conveyed by the press and by other mass means of communication [4,5,6]. Actually, following recent development of cultivation and uses and gratifications paradigms [7,8] empirical evidences showed the relationship between environmental concern, television viewing, and pro-environmental behaviors, thus highlighting the direct effects of various forms of television viewing and their potential mediating roles in the relationship between environmental attitudes and behaviors [9].

Like any other dimensions of reality, science is reconstructed and not merely mirrored in the media. Depictions of the world in the media result from a series of choices such as whether an issue will make the news, the highlight it will be given, and who is going to speak for it. Operations of codification of the issue into media discourse are directed by the perceived interest and social impact of a topic, as well as other “news values,” economic considerations and editorial lines. Particular values and worldviews are produced, reproduced and transformed in media discourses; others are excluded from them [10,11,12], as also shown by the critical discourse analysis paradigm [13,14,15,16,17].

Indeed, the mass media not only convey knowledge and attitudes, but actually by focusing attention on specific social meanings, implicitly set the public opinion’s agenda, indicating the positions which are mostly salient to a societal level [18,19]. By this process of *ideological dominance* [20], individual ideology is actually emptied of its original and specific meaning and becomes common sense, that is a socially shared interpretative repertoire, which conveys images of reality in a patterned and predictable way. In this sense media discourse becomes a very relevant part of the process by which people construct meanings and opinions, since it actively sets the frames of reference that the audience use to interpret and to discuss about public events [21].

With special reference to the topic of the present contribution, the mass media aim at framing ethical consumption positively, by emphasizing its most evident benefits, and by deleting any individual ideological meaning associated with it. As a result the development of public awareness about this ethical issue is depicted as a generalized good for all social actors. This conceptualization spread and conveyed by interpersonal communication and further amplified by mass media communication, becomes common sense, that is a code for the interpretation of personal experience which is more consonant with the claims of the campaign. In this light framing could be interpreted as a second level agenda, that is as central organizing schemes for both presenting and comprehending news. Thus, to frame means to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in such a way as “to promote a particular problem definition, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation” [22], pg. 52]. Media framing and presentation of events and news can thus systematically influence how the recipients come to understand the news. On the other hand, the audience makes sense of news and information by recurring to individual frames which could be conceived as “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individual’s processing of information” [22], pg. 53].

In view of the above the present contribution claimed that this evidence was particularly relevant with topical social issues such as climate change, which involve the sphere of public opinion as well as ethical behavior. More specifically, in the social circulation of the meanings associated with this issue, the media are a central arena and certainly play a part in shaping public and political options. This article analyzed the discursive representations of climate change conveyed by a public communication campaign.

Indeed, communication campaigns are among the policy tools most commonly used to attempt to influence public opinion of particular issues. The influence of the mass media on public opinion has been shown to be quite short-lived because media coverage jumps from issue to issue, often from day to day [23]. Many campaign programs in various environmental fields - including energy conservation campaigns and waste reduction campaigns - have used the mass media [24,25]. There have been various qualitative and quantitative analyses of mass-media coverage of climate change issues. Some have charted the rise and fall of media attention [26,27,28,29], where as others have focused on the reasons behind the cyclical nature of media attention [30,31,32,33,34]. Research groups have investigated the factors that affect media perspectives [35], the influence of news sources [36,37] and journalistic norms [38,39,40]. Another stream of research is based on surveys of public opinion on climate change. Many scholars have analysed the issue of climate change in terms of public perception [41,42,43]. The results of these studies have revealed that many people misunderstand the science of climate change and, in particular, are confused about the nature, causes and consequences of climate change [44,45]. Depth of understanding of climate-change issues depends largely on individual characteristics such as educational level, age, gender, occupation and ethnic origin [46,47,48]. Most of these studies have focused on how the public, as the receivers of mass-media messages, understand the issue of climate change. However, few studies have focused on the actual relationship between mass-media coverage and discursive construction of public awareness of climate change, which was the main target of the article.

### 3. Aims, Participants and Methodological Procedure

The aim of the present study was to investigate the discursive construction of critical/ethical consumption in a sample of students of University of Bari. Two focus group discussion were run to collect data. The first one involved 9 female students attending the second level degree course in Political Science (average age was 22 years old), the second one was held with 11 students attending the first level degree course in Psychology (1 male and 10 female; average age was 24 year old). This option was connected with the main intended target of the campaign video chosen as stimuli to the discussion.

Participants were asked to discuss about the meaning of critical consumption and about its most representative behaviors. Participants were also asked to talk about their own critical consumption behaviors and about the values driving their actions. After watching one of the Tv spot

broadcast on occasion of the 2012 Climate Change Awareness Campaign promoted by the European Commission, participants were invited to discuss about perceived efficacy of this kind of social communication, to express their opinion about its credibility, its agreeableness and its likelihood with the ordinary life's routines. The video was chosen because of its features: it is very short and very direct in communication, being a cartoon that lasted 3 minutes and 37 seconds. The screenplay was about the story of Mimi, a young girl who argued why and how to go green<sup>1</sup>. Here follows the text of the whole video:

"This is Mimi - Hello! - She got a mission: To save the world...but how? Not by saving the cheerleaders, but to go green! She inspires people, brings life to the next level, she has a dream... to change the community: from people who consume to people who conserve. How do we conserve the world? Mimi wants to tell you some tips to go green. 1) PAPER. Do you know that recycling one ton of paper can save 17 trees. When you write on a paper, write on both side of the paper, it is cheaper and eco-living! 2) TRANSPORTATION. Organize a car pooling system to save petrol and reduce air pollution, or you can just walk: good for your health and keeps you slim, 3) WASHING CLOTHES. Use cold water instead of hot water almost 90% of the energy used to wash clothes is used to heat the water, just turning the dial from hot to warm will cut your energy use by 50% per load. Use manually sun drying instead of drying machine it i energy saving and cost effective. 4) COMPUTER. It is fun to watch movie on pc. Shutdown your pc when not working instead of hibernating it. It is very simple to go green! Everyone can apply it! How about you? Dare to take my challenge. I support go green, maybe it looks effortless but just imagine if a thousand of people are doing the same like you...You can save the earth!

The video actually invited to share a "green" attitude by using a number of rhetorical devices typical of marketing communication. More specifically, the use of life "personalization" that is the direct appeal at a potential audience of young people who may share Mimi life style (e.g. through the repeated use of personal pronouns and imperative appeals), the use of rhetorical questions, that aimed at constructing a tension toward possible tips to follow in order to "save the world", the use of embrayage strategies aimed at involving the addressees "in the issue" by making them feel responsible for their actions and thus an active part of the problem ("How about you? You can save the world") just to quote some. In sum, the video framed ethical/critical consumption positively since it contained all the ingredients useful to feed a socially shareable representation of public awareness about this issue. Then the aim of the study was to catch the addressees' perception of this meaning making procedure and thus the discursive construction of their attitude toward green behaviours.

The discursive data coming from the discussion were analysed both in its content and in its discursive quality. Content analysis was performed with the aid of T-lab, a software for context analysis, which allows identifying the most significant thematic nexus of social discourses.

Furthermore, critical discourse analysis was adopted to investigate the communicative strategies (rhetorical figures, stylistic options, etc.) used by participants to make sense of critical consumption.

## 4. Results

The first issues discussed with participants were related with the impact of the video, in terms of agreeableness, efficacy of communication content and credibility. The students who took part to the study judged positively this form of communication campaign, they appreciated its form and contents and said that it was funny too, that is why they mostly felt invited to apply the tips suggested. Indeed, the colours, the characters, the music and the rhetorical strategy used resulted pretty convincing for this young audience, who shared most of Mimi's lifestyle.

1) "It is very funny, I have never thought that I could save the world as a superman, indeed it could be easier than it seems" (male, second level degree courses)

2) "Nice! we are all Mimi indeed!" (female, second degree courses)

The second step of analysis was referred to computer aided content analysis. Results from word association performed on the data showed that the focus of discussion was "environment". Figure 1 shows its close connection with other two central topics, namely "respect" and "critical consumption" which are related to "saving money", "responsible behavior" and "environmental resources" (Figure 2). In this perspective, pro-environmental behaviors resulted to be strictly linked to personal responsibility and driven by social values, which made us part of a community. These thematic nodes appeared mostly attuned with the contents proposed by the video showed, thus highlighting how media coverage on such public issues concretely contribute to develop mainstreams of meanings which resonate through social discourses about climate change [7,8].

**Table 1. Word association – Target word 'environment'**

Word	Distance coefficient	Occurrence	Association	$\chi^2$
Respect	0,38	18	10	24,04
To respect	0,37	7	6	27,3
Consumption	0,21	22	6	2,61

**Table 2. Word association – Target word 'consumption'**

Word	Distance coefficient	Occurrence	Association	$\chi^2$
Critical	0,55	12	9	65,74
Careful	0,28	5	3	15,84
Resources	0,26	6	3	12,32
Saving	0,21	16	4	5,16

According to the participants critical consumption is strongly connected with the concept of doing something that has reciprocal beneficial effects, that is both good for the environment and for one's own pocket. This strong relation between "saving money" and "saving resources for the environment", which is in line with an instrumental view of socially responsible behaviors, was one of the discursive pivots of the discussion as showed in the following extracts.

<sup>1</sup> The video is available at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS8-XInj\\_qg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS8-XInj_qg)

3) "a consumption style which avoids any waste and which shows benefits both for the environment and for individuals" (female- first level degree course)

4) "yes an economical saving is a saving of the resources that we often waste even with respect to those who do not have" (female- second level degree course)

From a strictly discursive point of view, by describing what critical/ethical consumption is, the two groups of participants adopted opposed rhetorical strategies. The group of first level degree courses, the younger participants, made use of debrayage strategies, that is they tended to describe ethical consumption as a universal and impersonal stance, while second level degree students, who were slightly older, adopted embrayage strategies, aimed at giving to their discourse a more personal tune (e.g. through the use of personal pronouns "we").

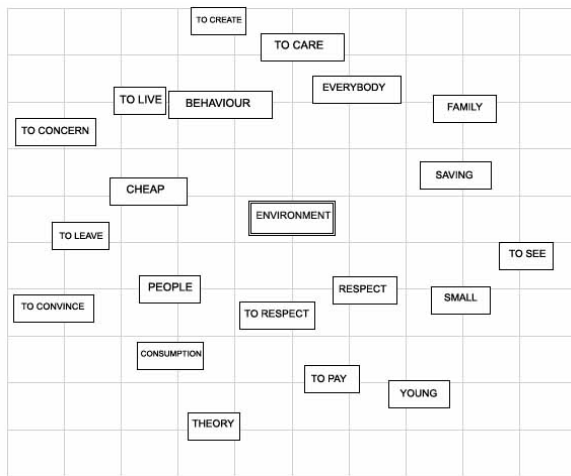


Figure 1. Word association: Focus on "Environment"

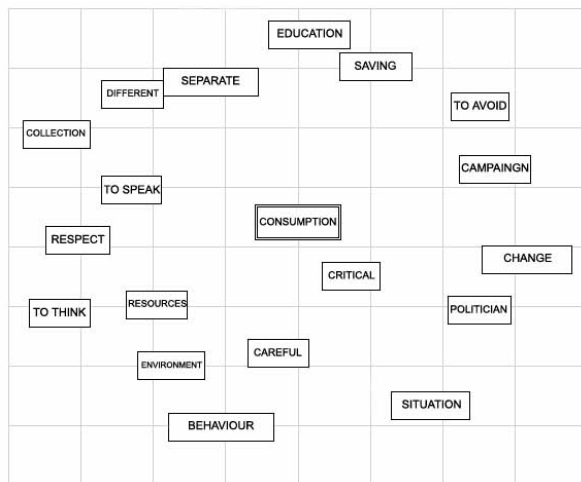


Figure 2. Word association: Focus on "Consumption"

In both cases, the most significant driving forces of critical consumption was a personal gain which was emphasized by all participants as being more important than the social/communitarian gain associated with this ethical option: a responsible behavior depends on the perception individuals have of any concrete benefits and comforts associated with such behavioral choices.

5) "From an ideological point of view I might agree with the necessity to take one's own responsibility for the environment, but actually you have to consider our daily routines (...) I think that it is easier to daily perform

behaviors which show actual and tangible benefits for individuals (...) These kind of behaviors are a cost for anyone, since they push people to dismantle old habits that is why I think it is easier to choose behaviors that show an immediate result not simply connected with a broader ideological stance" (female, first year degree course).

Such evidence is quite attuned with the assumption of the theory of *Reasoned Action* [49] and the theory of *Planned Behavior* [50] and with its most recent development that is the *model of Responsible Environmental Behavior* [51], which argues that a responsible pro-environmental behavior could be influenced among others by the perception of direct personal involvement, which in turn has impact on environmental awareness. Similarly, Diekmann and Preisendoerfer [52] explain the discrepancy between environmental attitude and pro-environmental behavior by using a low-cost/high-cost model. They propose that people choose the pro-environmental behaviors that demand the least cost. Cost in their model is not defined in a strictly economic sense but in a broader psychological sense that includes, among other factors, the time and effort needed to undertake a pro-environmental behavior. In their study they show that environmental attitude and low-cost pro-environmental behavior (e.g. recycling) do correlate significantly. People who care about the environment tend to engage in activities such as recycling but do not necessary engage in activities that are more costly and inconvenient such as driving or flying less. In other words, according to the literature a positive environmental attitude can directly influence low-cost pro-environmental behavior.

Therefore, through media discourses, like the promotional video presented as stimuli to the discussion, generally shape a meaning of critical consumption mostly focused on social responsibility, membership, collective respect, the network of discourses collected during this focus group mirrored a rather individualistic and self-focused view of such behavior, which is endorsed as long as it entails a personal gain.

The most representative behavior connected with a responsible attitude toward the environment mentioned by participants were linked to the ordinary practices of one's own life, i.e. it is concretely possible to show awareness about the climate change issue by using public transportations to limit pollution, by recycling plastic and paper, by turning off the light when out of the room, by closing the sink to save water when unnecessary (as for instance while brushing teeth).

6) "Yes, I generally adopt some of the behavior suggested by the video, I use to recycle plastic and paper and use public transportation, when it works!" (female, second year degree course).

In line with the literature [53] the analysis of the discursive data highlighted a different approach to critical consumption as a function of a traditional representation of an intergenerational difference. In other words, according to the participants interviewed, adults' consumption behavior style seemed to be careless of environmental issues unless they perceived critical/responsible consumption as a personal and/or economical gain. Results from the analysis of the thematic maps, focusing on the words "adult" showed its high



correlation with other thematic nodes linked to economical benefits such as “(economical) incentive”, “euro”, “value”, “bill” (Figure 3).

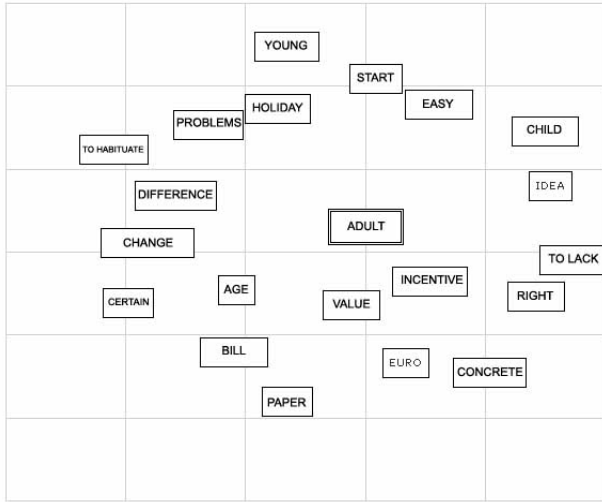


Figure 3. Word association: Focus “Adult”

Table 3. Word association - Target word ‘adults’

Word	Distance coefficient	Occurence	Association	x <sup>2</sup>
Incentive	0,40	4	2	37,65
Value	0,36	5	2	29,45
Euro	0,20	4	1	8,44
Bill	0,18	5	1	6,41

In this sense, the students involved in the study argued that adults generally considered the actual consistent economical saving signaled by a lighter bill at the end of the month as much more persuasive than the dissolution of glaciers. Differently, they assumed that young people were more inclined to act themselves as responsible and critical consumers since mostly driven by intrinsic motivations and personal value orientations, developed and enhanced by the main socialization practices, as for instance in education and/or through mass media communication (Figure 4). Furthermore, young people seemed to be generally more concerned about the future of the earth because it risked influencing seriously their future life’s projects.

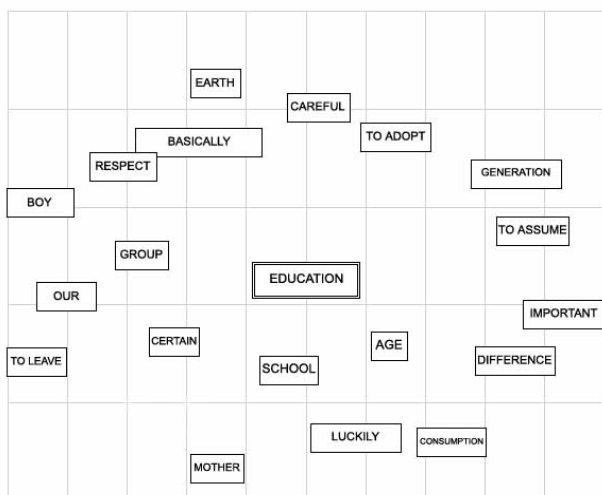


Figure 4. Word association: Focus “Education”

Table 4. Word association - Target word ‘education’

Word	Distance coefficient	Occurence	Association	x <sup>2</sup>
Age	0,42	10	3	39,86
School	0,40	11	3	35,85

To this respect, “value” proved itself to be another very important keyword within the discussion. Word association analysis showed a strong connection between “value” and the words “adult”, “incentive”, “bill”, “future”, “difference”, “euro”, “respect”. Once again, the generation gap in the perception participants had about critical consumption is highlighted: adults experienced critical consumption only in terms of a functional behavior useful to individual and economical purposes, while young people were much more concerned with its social and communitarian meaning thus displaying a greater civic consciousness (Figure 5). Though confirmed by some recent studies [54] such assumption would need further investigation as for instance by collecting discursive data also with adult samples.

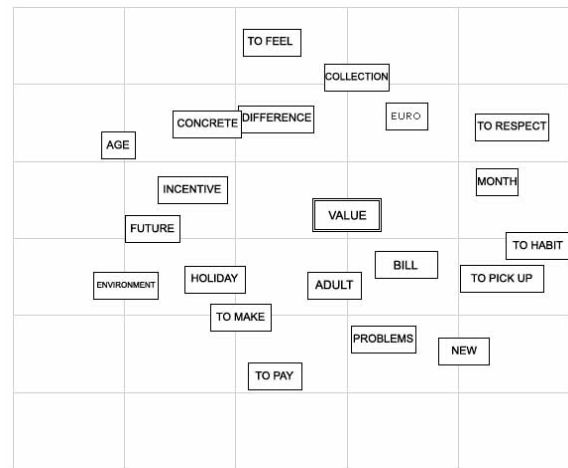


Figure 5. Word association: Focus “Value”

Table 5. Word association - Target word ‘value’

Word	Distance coefficient	Occurence	Association	x <sup>2</sup>
Bill	0,46	5	2	35,9
Adult	0,36	6	2	29,45
Incentive	0,22	4	1	10,472
Difference	0,22	4	1	10,472
Euro	0,22	4	1	10,472
Future	0,18	6	1	6,41
To respect	0,16	7	1	5,26

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The findings of the study provided a more encouraging picture of public understanding of ethical/critical consumption along with evidence of some positive contributions from mass media and interpersonal channels of communication.

Most of our respondents recognized climate change as a problem, many were significantly engaged with the topic, and many were communicating through mass media and interpersonal channels with significant effect on the breadth of their understanding. Despite their current

shortcomings, results suggested that the media are already making some contribution to public understanding of topics such as climate change awareness.

The importance of interpersonal communication also suggested that it may also be useful for the designers of public education campaigns to consider ways of creating community involvement in fostering pro-environmental behaviors. At present, attempts to solve this problem tend to concentrate on individual actions or on national or international policy options. However, there is evidence suggesting that providing targets for a community to reach can be effective in reducing waste or energy consumption [54]. This is another area in which communications research might make a useful contribution to engaging the public in solving environmental problems such as global climate change.

Nonetheless, many conflicting and competing factors shape personal daily decisions and actions. Similarly, there are several factors that influence our decisions towards pro-environmental behavior. People might be perfectly willing to change behavior but still not do so, because they do not persist enough in practicing the new behavior until it has become a habit, and until isn't too hard for us.

Though an undeniable influence of the media public social campaign, according to the sample of participants interviewed in the study, personal factors, more specifically concrete incentives and gains, seemed to be the most efficient factor promoting critical consumption's behaviors. Participants, who were all young people, declared that this attitude was especially true for older generations feeling less concerned about any engagement toward the future of our planet. On the other hand, they described themselves as generally more used to act responsibly; as more inclined to be critical and motivated consumer, driven by strong personal convictions and worries about their future and the future of the planet. Nonetheless, when confronted with the occurrence of actual daily pro-environmental behaviors few confirmed their good practices in going green. Then, this ideological and value driven stance still remained at a theoretical level.

Though its explorative nature and the very limited sample involved, the study has attempted to give a contribution to future research in communication research applied to the topic of ethical/critical consumption by showing how a more complete understanding of its complex nature might take into account the influence of other factors such as the network of common sense rhetoric about social issues, media meaning making procedures and personal attitudes. As a result it has attempted at highlighting the importance of further investigating the mediating role of the personal investments (not only in terms of values and emotions but also in extrinsic concrete terms) associated with the choice of sharing a pro-environmental lifestyle, since it could intervene between communication campaigns fruition and actual behavioral choices.

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