Too Abstract to Act? Developing a Typology of Consumer Climate Engagement Based on Social Exchange and Construal Level Theory: Structured Abstract

INTRODUCTION

Despite increasing awareness of climate change, consumer action to mitigate it remains insufficient (Ritchie et al., 2023). Since two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions are directly or indirectly linked to household consumption (Ivanova et al., 2020), fostering Consumer Climate Engagement (CCE) – defined as the voluntary investment of time, effort, and money in climate-positive behaviors – is essential.

Previous research on sustainable consumption has mainly emphasized individual values or moral drivers (Testa et al., 2021), overlooking the exchange-like nature of engagement decisions. Consumers implicitly weigh costs (e.g., financial, temporal, or psychological effort) against benefits (e.g., savings, well-being, or social approval) when deciding whether to act. However, most studies treat these trade-offs as uniform across behaviors, implicitly assuming that climate-friendly actions are mainly characterized by immediate, concrete costs (e.g., money) and distant, abstract benefits (i.e., mitigating climate change) (e.g., Loy & Spence, 2020; Trudel, 2019; Van Lange & Huckelba, 2021).

We argue that this assumption oversimplifies reality. Different forms of CCE involve distinct cost-benefit configurations that vary in both magnitude and concreteness. For instance, purchasing an electric vehicle (EV) entails concrete costs and immediate benefits, while donating to carbon offsetting projects involves concrete costs but abstract, long-term benefits. Recognizing these variations is critical to understanding why consumers engage more readily in some forms of climate action than others, and provides valuable insight into how policymakers and organizations can promote specific CCE forms more effectively.

To address this gap, we integrate Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Construal Level Theory (CLT) to conceptualize CCE as an exchange process shaped by the perceived concreteness (vs. abstractness) of costs and benefits. This perspective leads to a two-dimensional typology of CCE that systematically captures variations across different engagement forms. A first qualitative study on EVs illustrates one specific type – Tangible Exchanges – highlighting how concrete, self-relevant benefits can sustain climate engagement despite high costs.

BACKGROUND

Consumer Climate Engagement and Social Exchange Theory

CCE extends the concept of consumer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2019, 2023) to climate-relevant contexts by emphasizing voluntary resource investments that create mutual value between consumers and stakeholders. Within the lens of SET, engagement depends on a trade-off between the resources gained vs. invested, i.e., perceived benefits and costs (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). SET further posits that exchanges are guided by principles of reciprocity and fairness (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Consumers are more willing to engage in and sustain climate-related behaviors when they perceive that their investments are acknowledged and fairly rewarded – whether through concrete returns such as financial savings or through symbolic rewards like recognition and trust. Conversely, when perceived reciprocity is lacking, or when the exchange appears unbalanced or unjust, engagement tends to decline.

The theory accommodates multiple exchange partners, including brands, communities, governments, and other stakeholders. In the context of CCE, exchange partners can range from direct and tangible actors, such as companies providing sustainable products, to more abstract entities like governments, communities, future generations, or even nature itself. The perceived reciprocity and reliability of these partners shape how consumers evaluate fairness and value in the exchange (Molm, 2003).

SET further distinguishes between concrete and abstract resources, which differ in their tangibility, measurability, and transferability (Foa & Foa, 1974, 1980). Concrete resources, such as money or physical goods, are easily quantified and exchanged across contexts, while abstract resources, such as social approval, moral satisfaction, or trust, are symbolic in nature, subjective in value, and often embedded in specific relationships. However, previous CCE research has not systematically examined how different types of resources alter engagement decisions. SET provides the foundation for such differentiation that can be complemented by the concept of psychological distance as suggested by CLT.

Construal Level Theory and the Role of Concreteness

CLT adds a cognitive dimension by explaining how individuals' perceptions of psychological distance affect how they construe outcomes as concrete and immediate or abstract and distant. Psychological distance refers to the perceived gap between an individual and an object, event, or concept across four dimensions: time, space, social relationships, and likelihood (hypotheticality) (Ein-Gar & Levontin, 2013). Climate-related benefits are often perceived as temporally and socially distant, reducing their motivational impact, especially when paired with concrete, near-term costs (White et al., 2019). Yet this pattern is not universal: certain CCE behaviors offer immediate, concrete rewards (e.g., cost savings from EV ownership or enjoyment from plant-based foods), while others primarily yield abstract, collective outcomes (e.g., policy activism or carbon offsetting). Psychological distance influences how consumers mentally represent the costs and benefits of their engagement. When outcomes are perceived as distant or uncertain – such as in the absence of prior experience with a particular form of CCE – they are construed more abstractly, which may attenuate their motivational impact.; by contrast, outcomes that are near in time, space, or personal relevance are viewed concretely, making them more salient in decision-making (Keller et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

Conceptual Development of a CCE Typology

Building on the integration of SET and CLT, we propose a typology of CCE that categorizes different engagement forms based on the perceived concreteness of costs and benefits. The typology positions CCE along a two-dimensional matrix, distinguishing between concrete versus abstract costs and concrete versus abstract benefits. The cost dimension captures the types of resources consumers perceive as being invested, including financial expenditures, time and effort, and emotional strain or behavioral inconvenience. These costs can range from concrete (e.g., higher purchase prices) to abstract (e.g., lifestyle adjustments, perceived loss of comfort). The benefit dimension, in turn, includes material outcomes (e.g., product performance), psychological rewards (e.g., pride, moral satisfaction), and social recognition (e.g., status, belonging). As costs, benefits vary in their concreteness depending on their tangibility and psychological distance. Based on the dimensions of cost and benefit

concreteness, we identify four distinct types of CCE, each reflecting a unique configuration of perceived resources and motivational orientations.

1. *Tangible Exchange*: Involve *concrete costs* and *concrete benefits*, where consumers exchange tangible and/or measurable resources for similarly tangible returns (e.g., buying organic products). Engagement is primarily transactional and motivated by immediate personal or material value.
2. *Pay-it-Forward*: Characterized by *concrete costs* but *abstract benefits*, these engagements entail direct personal sacrifices with benefits that are distant and uncertain. Examples include donating to carbon offset programs or funding reforestation projects. The exchange is prosocial and grounded in moral or altruistic motives, but perceived reciprocity is weak due to the psychological distance of beneficiaries.
3. *Effort-with-Purpose*: Represent *abstract costs* and *abstract benefits*, where consumers invest time, energy, or identity-related effort in individual actions, such as reducing flights or switching to public transport, or collective actions such as climate activism and community volunteering. These forms of CCE are driven by value alignment and a sense of (shared) purpose rather than direct personal gain
4. *Rewarding Sacrifices*: Entail *abstract costs* but *concrete benefits*, where consumers adopt behaviors requiring lifestyle adjustments (e.g., adopting a plant-based diet, upcycling, or reducing consumption) yet receive clear, personally relevant rewards such as improved health, emotional satisfaction, or social recognition. Engagement is often sustained through the interplay of self-oriented rewards and moral gratification.

Together, these four types illustrate that CCE behaviors vary not only in how much consumers invest, but also in how concretely or abstractly they construe both the costs and the benefits of their actions.

Qualitative Study

As an initial step in this ongoing research project, we conducted a qualitative study to invesitgate one of the proposed types – tangible exchanges – using the example of EVs. The study aimed to empirically explore how concrete consumers' perceptions are regarding the costs and benefits of purchasing and using an EV. To this end, an exploratory qualitative approach was applied, combining focus group discussions with a visual mapping technique to capture consumers' mental models of value assessment in climate-related decisions. The study took place during the *E-Mobility Forum 2025* at a German university. In total, 31 participants – including both (7) EV owners and (24) potential buyers – took part in three moderated focus group sessions.

The focus groups followed a participatory visual method, inspired by projective and mapping techniques commonly used in qualitative consumer research (e.g., value mapping (Butters & Jakobsen, 2023)). In particular, a large A0 poster was used to structure the discussion for each group: This visual mapping exercise disentangled the concreteness–abstractness dimension for both costs and benefits. Two separate scales (ranging from 0 = concrete to 100 = abstract) were presented, allowing participants to position their perceptions of EV-related benefits and costs along these continua. To distinguish between groups, colored sticker dots were used: green for EV owners and red for non-owners. This visual distinction enabled direct comparison between those with and without EV experience – a key differentiator as ownership typically increases experiential concreteness (i.e., following the CLT). After positioning their markers, participants explained their reasoning in short verbal statements, which were transcribed for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All (seven) EV owners indicated highly concrete benefit (all between 0-15% abstractness) and even more concrete cost perceptions (between 0-10% abstractness), confirming our assumption to define an EV purchase as a rather concrete exchange. However (as expected), the twenty-four non-owners indicated a higher level of abstractness for both the perceived 'expected' costs (20–40% abstractness) and perceived 'expected' benefits (20–60% abstractness), suggesting more mixed perceptions among consumers who lack personal experience with EVs. This difference can be explained by a smaller PD for EV owners, that is caused by the diminished uncertainty regarding the outcomes of owning such a vehicle. Still, the results suggest that, on average, an EV purchase can be classified as a *Tangible Exchange* in line with our typology.

The qualitative insights added to the markers on the abstractness scales provided contextual richness for interpreting the distribution patterns on the poster. Example statements included reflections such as "*I know exactly what I get when I test and buy an EV*" or "*I could ask others and check manifold sources in the internet*" (signaling the concreteness of both the costs and benefits for potentials). In contrast, some respondents mentioned that information about charging locations and prices was often unclear, suggesting a high level of abstractness in cost evaluations. Additionally, several participants were uncertain about their future EV's performance (e.g., charging speed, true battery capacity, and driving range), reflecting similarly abstract perceptions driven by the uncertainty of crucial outcomes. Interestingly, the participants did not doubt the positive environmental impact of switching to an EV.

Overall, the findings indicate that experiential familiarity substantially reduces perceived psychological distance, leading to more concrete mental representations of both costs and benefits. Specifically, EV owners construe the exchange as a clear, tangible value trade-off – financial investment against direct, practical and emotional rewards – whereas non-owners rely on more abstract, uncertain assumptions and insecurities remain. These results empirically illustrate the tangible exchange type, demonstrating how the concreteness of both resource dimensions facilitates stronger engagement intentions and sustained climate-relevant CCE behavior.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

This research advances a new, integrative framework linking SET and CLT to explain variations in CCE. This conceptual integration provides the foundation for our CCE typology, which categorizes engagement forms according to the perceived concreteness of their costs and benefits ranging from tangible market exchanges to abstract, community-oriented efforts. Thereby, the typology contributes to the understanding of why engagement differs across behaviors and contexts, offering guidance for designing more targeted interventions to foster consumer climate action.

The initial qualitative findings on EV adoption offer preliminary support, illustrating how tangible exchanges can sustain motivation despite high costs. This study encourages future research to validate the typology across multiple forms of CCE and to examine how perceived concreteness can be shaped. Practitioners may leverage this understanding to design more persuasive messages when trying to encourage CCE. Ultimately, framing CCE as an exchange that feels immediate and reciprocal may help bridge the persistent attitude-behavior gap.

References Available Upon Request