

# Improve recycling compliance by using this technique in public service announcements

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A specific messaging strategy used in a public service announcement (PSA) video can effectively encourage New Yorkers who struggle with recycling compliance to properly separate their trash from recycling,

according to the results of a University at Buffalo study.

The researchers designed the successful [video](#) using the theory of planned [behavior](#) (TPB), which predicts intention to act on three factors: the extent to which a behavior is seen as favorable; perceived social pressure to perform that behavior; and the perceived difficulty of the behavior.

Intent, however, doesn't always translate into action. Even with the best intention, people sometimes fail to recycle properly because [recycling](#) guidelines in New York State can vary from town to town. To achieve desirable impact, environmental campaigns need to consider what people currently know about recycling, researchers say.

"We found the PSA video to be particularly effective among audiences who have limited knowledge about recycling or those who do not yet engage in proper recycling," says Zhuling Liu, a UB doctoral candidate who led the research published in the journal *Environment, Development and Sustainability*. "When thinking about approachable messaging, this strategy can be very useful."

Recycling seems pretty easy: Put the trash in one bin and recyclables in another. But Americans aren't doing it right. Many items land in the wrong bin.

The National Recycling Partnership estimates that non-recyclables contaminate nearly one-fifth of the material picked up curbside, a problem that can force processing centers to dispose of entire loads, even if most of the material is otherwise acceptable. A [policy change](#) in China, which previously handled nearly half of the world's recyclables, compounds that non-compliance. Starting in 2018, China's National Sword policy banned the import of recyclable waste from many countries, including the United States.

Americans generally favor recycling, to the extent that they contribute to contamination by "wish-cycling," according to Liu.

"This wishful recycling refers to the tendency to recycle everything one deems recyclable," says Liu. "But more often than not, this behavior is increasing costs at recycling facilities that now require additional staff or expensive machinery to sort out contamination."

These realities have limited the amount of material accepted in some municipalities, while threatening other unprofitable recycling programs with possible elimination.

"A variety of issues and the overall changes in the global market point to the need for a re-education effort about engaging in proper recycling," says Janet Yang, Ph.D., a professor of communication in the UB College of Arts and Science, and co-author of the study. "Our findings suggest that we've found an effective tool for doing so."

For their study, the researchers asked roughly 700 participants, all New York State residents, to complete an online survey related to recycling behavior. Half of that group watched a 60-second recycling PSA video, and the other half only filled out a questionnaire. Both groups answered questions related to their attitude toward recycling, their perceived social popularity of the behavior, and whether they find recycling to be an easy thing to do. Results indicate that the PSA video was particularly effective in increasing recycling intention among participants who did not feel confident about their own recycling behavior.

Because the sample was limited to New York State, the results are not generalizable across the nation. Still, the PSA video does appear to be a promising tool for increasing awareness and improving environmental engagement.

"This strategic communication messaging delivered through a video format may be particularly effective among individuals who perceive themselves to have limited ability to recycle properly," says Liu. "That's a good start."

**More information:** Zhuling Liu et al, Recycling as a planned behavior: the moderating role of perceived behavioral control, *Environment, Development and Sustainability* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10668-021-01894-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-021-01894-z)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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