Green message framing effects on social media engagement: Moderating role of morality traits

Seeun Kim[1], Tae Hyun Baek[2], and Michelle Childs[3]
Auburn University[1], University of Kentucky[2], and University of Tennessee[3]

Keywords: Social media engagement, green ad campaign, construal level theory, moral identity

Purpose/Rationale: Environmental plastic pollution is a global concern and consumers have shown a growing interest for brands that take responsibility at persevering the Earth (Chang et al., 2015). As the pro-environmental movement becomes increasingly important, many fashion brands actively promote green advertising across various social media channels to raise consumers' awareness of their efforts. However, despite the popularity of green campaigns, there is still a need to understand what types of messages best encourage consumers' engagement on social media and how individual characteristic influencers the message framing effect. To fill this gap, this study experimentally examines the interaction effect of construal level in green advertising and morality traits on consumers' social media engagement. The relationship between construal level and morality will be investigated by testing how individual differences in moral and green identity change the way consumers construe information on green advertising.

Conceptual Framework/Hypothesis Development: According to the construal level theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 2008), consumers' perception toward the event can be differentiated by psychological distance. Psychologically distant events can be represented at a high-construal level as being more abstract and reason-oriented, whereas psychologically proximal events can be represented at a low-construal level and perceived as being more concrete and action-oriented. According to CLT, individuals have divergent reactions to *desirability appeal* (e.g., why do we need to reduce plastic waste?) or *feasibility appeal* (e.g., how can we reduce plastic waste?). Researchers indicated that CLT can be linked to moral judgement, but inconsistent findings exist in the literature (Erika, 2017). While some researchers suggest that a high-construal level increases moral judgement (Eyal et al., 2008), others found that people with a high-construal level are less focused on moral values, and in turn, present less virtuous behaviors than those in a low-construal level (Zezelj & Jokic, 2014). However, there is lack of research that examines how individual's moral traits, such as moral identity or green identity, affect the construal message evaluation. Moral identity is defined as an individual's cognitive network of moral traits (e.g., being caring), feeling (e.g., concern for others), and behavior (e.g., helping others; Aquino & Reed, 2002). Individuals with a higher moral identity are willing to provide support or aid to those in need. Thus, moral identity is a strong predictor of altruistic behavior such as charitable donation (Aquino et al., 2009). According to previous literature, it is expected that individuals with a higher moral and green identity activate their moral accessibility and they are more actively engage with altruistic behavior (Wu et al., 2018). Therefore, they will carefully read green advertising and positively respond to concrete messages that show the ways to reduce plastic waste than abstract messages. On the other hand, individuals with a lower moral and green identity may not activate their moral accessibility and are less concerned about environment issues. Thus, message framing in green advertising may not affect their social media engagement. Accordingly,

H1. *Consumers with a higher moral (green) identity will exhibit greater social media engagement than those with a lower moral (green) identity.*

H2a. *For consumers with a higher moral (green) identity, feasibility appeal will elicit greater social media engagement than desirability appeal.*

H2b. *For consumers with a lower moral (green) identity, message appeal effect will disappear.*

Research Design/Procedure: Two experimental studies were conducted to examine the hypotheses above. In Study 1, we used a one-factor (message appeal: desirability vs. feasibility) between-subjects online experiment. A total of 188 U.S. consumers (53.8% male, M_{age} = 41.96) were recruited from the Amazon Mturk consumer panel and assigned randomly to one of the two conditions. First, participants responded to measures for moral identity (Lee et al., 2014) and were asked to read an Instagram ad message that were framed as desirability appeal (reasons to reduce plastic waste) or feasibility appeal (ways to reduce plastic waster). After exposure to the experimental stimuli, participants responded to measures for social media engagement (Jin & Phua, 2014), manipulation checks, and demographic questions. In study 2, we employed a one-factor (message appeal: desirability vs. feasibility) between-subjects design. A total of 147 U.S. consumers (50.3% male, M_{age} = 40.43) were recruited from the Amazon Mturk consumer panel and randomly assigned to one of the two conditions. After participants responded to green identity measures (Whitmarch & O'Neill, 2010), they viewed the priming ad and responded to measures of social media engagement, manipulation check questions, and demographic questions.

Results. In Study 1, we found a significant main effect of moral identity, in which participants with a higher moral identity reported greater social media engagement than those with a lower moral identity ($M_{high-moral}$ = 3.5, $M_{low-moral}$ = 2.59, t = 2.57, p = .011), supporting H1. The interaction effect between message framing and moral identity on social media engagement was statistically significant (F (1, 184) = 5.30, p = .022). Specifically, the feasibility (vs. desirability) appeal was more effective in enhancing social media engagement for higher moral participants ($M_{desirability}$ = 3.14, $M_{feasibility}$ = 4.25, F (1, 184) = 4.33, p = .039). However, no significant difference between message framing emerged for the lower moral participants ($M_{desirability}$ = 2.91, $M_{feasibility}$ = 2.32, F (1, 184) = 2.65, p = .105). Thus, H2a and H2b were supported. In study 2, we found a significant main effect of green identity ($M_{high-moral}$ = 4.23, $M_{low-moral}$ = 2.7, t = 5,3, p = .000) and an interaction effect F (1, 143) = 5.18, p = .024) on social media engagement. Also, the feasibility (vs. desirability) appeal was more effective for higher moral participants ($M_{desirability}$ = 3.80 $M_{feasibility}$ = 4.64, F (1, 143) = 3.73, p = .05), but no significant difference between message framing emerged for the lower moral participants ($M_{desirability}$ = 2.91, $M_{feasibility}$ = 2.45, F (1, 143) = 1.55, p = .215). Thus, H1, H2a, and H2b were supported.

Discussion. These findings of the current research make several theoretical and managerial contributions. We suggest that individuals' morality is the key moderator that affects green marketing strategy on social media. Although prior studies suggest that moral identity is a powerful predictor in increasing prosocial behavior, it does not unconditionally enhance consumers' engagement toward green advertising. Specifically, our study showed that consumers with a higher moral identity revealed greater engagement for the feasibility appeal than the desirability appeal. Accordingly, it is important to provide concrete and specific ideas of how to follow green campaigns when consumers have a highly moral tendency. Thus, companies could strategically consider individuals' differences on morality in segmenting target consumers for their social media campaign and subsequently utilize feasibility verses desirability appeals in accordance with target customers.

References available upon request