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Using social media to promote pro-sustainability behaviours: a quasi-experimental study on message framing

Social media advertising can be used to persuade consumers to act more sustainably. We analysed the effects of outcome and target message framing on consumer involvement variation, attitudes (toward the cause and company) and behavioural intentions (toward the cause and company). The messages are tested in a quasi-experiment in the context of disposable/reusable cups in the hospitality sector. While all stimuli led to an increase in cause involvement, only the outcome message frame showed statistically significant differences, with gain messages being most effective. We reflect on the value of social media to test persuasive communication messages, and the potential for technology to be used for social good.

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Introduction

The hospitality industry hands out 500 billion disposable cups annually (White, Hardisty, & Habib, 2019) of which only a small percentage are being recycled due to the combination of materials they are made from (BBC News, 2018; Laville, 2018). With this, the hospitality industry contributes to the estimated USD 139 billion of annual social and environmental costs caused by plastic in general (Lord, 2016). Many companies have now started to acknowledge the need for more sustainable and responsible behaviour and, in response, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and its advertising are becoming ever more important (Joireman, Liu, & Kareklas, 2018; Bortree, Ahern, Smith, & Dou, 2013). Given that CSR actions, such as advertising a reduction of disposable coffee cup usage, can have potential far-reaching consequences on firm performance on the one hand (Inoue et al., 2017), and often rely on consumer engagement to succeed on the other hand (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019), understanding consumers' response to CSR advertising is crucial for managers. However, this remains an under-researched area (Dhanesh & Nekmat, 2019; Diehl, 2017) as exemplified by an analysis of CSR communications papers by Golob et al. (2013). He found that only 15 out of 90 analysed papers on CSR communications and disclosure relate to CSR advertising. It is not surprising then that the Marketing Science Institute (MSI), which regularly asks all member companies to provide input on the topics that are of importance to them, declares one of the 2018-2020 research priority questions to be whether green marketing is effective and when and how these strategies work (Marketing Science Institute, n.d.).

This study focuses on understanding the effect of a combined use of outcome and target frames in CSR advertising on consumer involvement with the social cause as well as attitudes and behavioural intentions related to the firm and the cause.

Literature Review

CSR advertising on social media

CSR advertising refers to a company's mass communication that projects the organisation's CSR image, disclosing its sustainability programs, actions or stances. Traditionally, companies disseminate ads via newspapers, magazines, radio and television (Shimp & Andrews, 2013). However, with the emergence of the internet, Social Networking Sites (SNS) are becoming increasingly important for CSR communications. A study found that many stakeholders find social media not only an important but also a trustworthy channel to communicate CSR initiatives (Ali, Jiménez-Zarco, & Bicho, 2015). Respondents of that same survey also think that CSR communication via social media positively influences their purchasing behaviour (Ali et al., 2015). As such, it is not surprising that more and more firms utilise social media to publish information on their CSR activities (Cho, Furey, & Mohr, 2017; Lee, Yoon, & O'Donnell, 2018).

The largest SNS is Facebook with 2.41 billion monthly active users as of June 2019 (Facebook, 2019). This not only effectively makes it one of the most important advertising media for marketers due to its reach but also means that most survey respondents should be familiar with the format of Facebook posts. We acknowledge that organisational communication integrates online and mobile advertising media in its marketing strategies (Lee, 2016), and the importance of social networking sites for CSR communications (Lee, Yoon, & O'Donnell, 2018). Hence, we shall use social media to test persuasive communication messages, to subsequently reflect on the potential of technology to be used for social good.

Message framing and CSR advertising

Audience responses to a message are affected both by the content of a message and by the way it is presented (Orth, Koenig, & Firbasova, 2007) as this has the potential to influence how one thinks and feels about the focal subject. Message framing refers to techniques whereby objectively equivalent information is described in different ways to elicit distinct responses and choices from audiences (Segev, Fernandes, & Wang, 2015). This represents a widely under-researched area in CSR communications (Overton, 2018).

For this study, the outcome and target frames have been chosen to be investigated, because a 30-year study of CSR advertisements found that companies most often use a gain/current generation frame in their advertising, even though there is no consensus about the effectiveness of different frames in achieving consumer CSR engagement and behavioural change (Bortree et al., 2013).

Outcome frames present a message either as a gain or a loss. A gain-framed message thereby emphasises the positive consequences of an (in)action, while the loss-framed message highlights the negative consequences of an (in)action (Segev et al., 2015). The outcome frame has its origins in prospect theory which was developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979). Prospect theory holds that decision problems that are differently framed lead to distinct option preferences even when the outcomes are equal in both instances. According to this theory, loss-framed (or negative) information is more effective in encouraging risk-involving behaviours while gain-framed messages are more effective in encouraging cautious behaviour (Segev et al., 2015).

Target frames present messages either within a short-term or long-term perspective. The way in which this type of message framing can potentially provoke distinct reactions is based on construal level theory. Construal level theory postulates that how an individual construes information depends on the psychological distance. Psychological distance thereby

refers to an individual's subjective perception of how close or distant an object or event is temporally, spatially or socially speaking, with the reference point being the self in the here and now (Trope & Liberman, 2010). With an increasing psychological distance of an object, the object is thought of in more abstract features (this is referred to as high-level construal) while psychologically close objects are represented in terms of concrete features (low-level construals) (Trope & Liberman, 2010). This means that proximal (distal) future events are construed in more concrete (abstract) features (White, Macdonnell, & Dahl, 2011).

Research hypotheses and conceptual framework

In summary, 1) there is limited research on the effectiveness of message frames in increasing cause involvement, 2) there is discrepancy in the findings, and 3) not enough studies have tested the effect of a combination of outcome and target frames on cause involvement, as this study does. Hence, the following research question regarding the relationship between message framing and cause involvement is posed:

RQ1. Will a combination of outcome and target message frames be able to increase cause involvement and if so, which message frame combination is most effective in doing so?

As established previously, the basis of message framing is prospect theory, according to which positive messages are more effective in encouraging prevention behaviour, while negative messages are more effective in eliciting risky behaviour (Segev et al., 2015). As most sustainable behaviour can be classified as low-risk and preventive, positive message frames should be more effective than negatively-framed messages. Van de Velde et al. (2010), for example, found that positive messages that stress the possibility of overcoming environmental problems are more efficacious in increasing issue concern and perceived consumer effectiveness. Segev et al. (2015) showed that gain frames lead to significantly greater brand attitude as well as purchase intention, and Jacobson et al. (2018) demonstrated

that benefit-focused, positive messages lead to a higher willingness to contribute time or money to the social cause. Accordingly:

H1a, H2a, H3a & H4a. *A gain-focused message will have a greater favourable influence on (H1a) consumers' attitudes toward the company, (H2a) attitudes toward the cause, (H3a) behavioural intentions toward the company and (H4a) behavioural intentions toward the cause than a loss-focused message.*

While research investigating the effects of target frames in isolation is rather sparse, Segev et al. (2015) found that messages focused on the self, increase brand attitude as well as purchase intentions. Proximal future or the current generation message frame can thereby be seen as a dimension of self-reference frames as per the construal level theory. Therefore:

H1b, H2b, H3b & H4b. *A current generation target message frame will have a greater favourable influence on (H1a) consumers' attitudes toward the company, (H2a) attitudes toward the cause, (H3a) behavioural intentions toward the company and (H4a) behavioural intentions toward the cause than a future generation message frame.*

Davis (1995) suggests that outcome and target frames do not affect dependent variables independently but only via an interaction effect, specifically suggesting that the combination of negative-current frames is most influential in enhancing advertising attitudes and behavioural intentions. Segev et al. (2015) found that negative message frames evoke more favourable advertising and brand attitudes as well as purchase intentions when combined with a self-reference frame. This has also been found by Chang et al. (2015) who investigated a present and future frame rather than a self- or other-reference frame, and found that gain-future frame combinations are most effective. Therefore:

H1c, H2c, H3c & H4c. *There is an interaction effect of the outcome and target message frame thus that a combination of loss-current and gain-future message frames are most*

effective in increasing (H1c) consumers' attitudes toward the company, (H2c) attitudes toward the cause, (H3c) behavioural intentions toward the company and (H4c) behavioural intentions toward the cause.

Methodology

Experimental design and research stimuli. Research hypotheses were tested via an online survey using a 2 (outcome frame: gain vs. loss) x 2 (target frame: future generation vs. current generation) between-subjects quasi-experimental design. The stimuli consisted of Facebook post mock-ups from a fictitious company which contained the manipulated messages.

Research instrument. The online questionnaire was developed to measure the research construct of the conceptual framework. The construct of cause involvement is measured through a seven-item semantic differential scale adopted from Grau and Folse (2007). These items were included twice in the questionnaire to gauge participants' initial involvement with the cause (A) and compare this to the level of involvement after stimuli exposure (B). Company attitude is operationalised through four items in a semantic differential scale by Kim, Cheong and Lim (2015). Finally, the seven-point Likert scale used to measure cause attitude is adapted from Johnson-Young and Magee (2019). The variable 'behavioural intention towards the company' was measured via two items on a seven-point Likert scale which were derived from the three-item purchase intention scale from Putrevu and Lord (1994) and the three-item recommendation likelihood scale from Price and Arnould (1999). Lastly, the variable 'behavioural intentions towards the social cause' was measured through two items, measuring 1) the likelihood to recommend the social cause (based on Price & Arnould, 1999) and 2) the likelihood of the respondent to use reusable cups.

Data collection and research sample. Data collection took place in August 2019 by means of an online study to U.S. consumers. A combination of quota and judgment sampling was used. Respondents were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk). The final sample consisted of 466. The four stimuli groups were very similar in size. No statistically significant differences were observed between the four stimulus groups in terms of age, gender, education, ethnicity and their initial level of involvement. Most participants stated to be non-Hispanic white (73.6%) while all other ethnicities were below 10% each. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 73 with the arithmetic mean being 37.91 (SD = 11.84; σ_2 = 140.26). Furthermore, almost half of respondents had an undergraduate degree (43.8%) and 28.1% had some college education.

In the study sample, the use of reusable coffee cups (RC) (provided by the company or by the customer) is quite low ($\bar{x}$ = 2.75 and 2.76 on a seven-point scale) in comparison to the use of disposable coffee cups (DC) ($\bar{x}$ = 4.91).

Data analysis. To analyse the results, SPSS 20.0 was used. The significance level for the present research was $p < 0.05$. For the analysis, the dependent variables were calculated by taking the mean of the individual scale items. In addition, four new variables were computed. The variable STIMULI (Loss-Current, Loss-Future, Gain-Current, Gain-Future) shows the combination of outcome and target frame that cases were assigned to during the survey and the variables OUTCOME (Gain, Loss) and TARGET (Current, Future) show the respective outcome and target message frame dimension. The variable VAR_INVOLVEMENT shows the difference between the initial cause involvement INV_A and the cause involvement post stimuli exposure INV_B.

Findings

Effects of message framing on cause involvement. To analyse RQ1, t-test analysis and ANOVA were conducted. Firstly, results indicate that cause involvement after stimulus exposure (x̄ = 5.27, SD = 1.643) is significantly higher than before stimulus exposure (x̄ = 4.64, SD = 1.761), $t(465) = -12.283$, $p < .001$, $r = .49$. This suggests that CSR message faming has a positive impact on the difference between involvement prior to and after stimulus exposure (VAR_INVOLVEMENT). This means that managers can cast a wider net in their CSR advertising: Rather than only targeting those individuals that already have high levels of involvement with the promoted cause, managers can use CSR advertising to increase cause involvement in all message recipients no matter their initial level of involvement.

Secondly, to analyse whether the four message frame combinations differ in their effects on cause involvement, a two-way independent ANOVA was run with OUTCOME and TARGET as factors and VAR_INVOLVEMENT as dependent variables. Results show that there was a significant main effect of the outcome message frame on the increase of cause involvement, $F(1, 462) = 5.53$, $p = 0.19$. There was neither a significant main effect of the target frame ($F(1, 462) = 1.128$, $p = .289$) nor an interaction effect between the outcome and target message frames ($F(1, 462) = .007$, $p = .934$) on the increase in cause involvement. This indicates that a gain message frame is more effective in increasing cause involvement while there is no difference in the effectiveness of the two target message frames. While not significant, it can be said that overall the future message frames led to slightly higher increases in cause involvements than the current message frames.

Effects of outcome message framing on attitudes and behavioural intentions. There are significant differences of the outcome message frame on company attitude (($t(431.320) = 4.368$, $p < .001$, $r = .21$) and behavioural intentions towards the company (($t(464) = 3.169$, $p = .002$, $r = .15$). Accordingly, the gain message leads to significantly higher levels of company attitude (Gain: $\bar{x} = 6.17$ vs. Loss: $\bar{x} = 5.69$ on a seven-point scale) as well as behavioural intentions towards the company (Gain: $\bar{x} = 5.23$ vs. Loss: $\bar{x} = 4.83$). These results support H1a and H3a. There are no significant differences of the outcome message frame on cause attitude (($t(464) = -.332$, $p = .740$) and behavioural intentions towards the cause (($t(464) = .500$, $p = .617$). Consequently, H2a and H4a are rejected.

Effects of target message framing on attitudes and behavioural intentions. There are no significant differences of the target message frame on company attitude ($t(464) = -0.860$, $p = .390$), cause attitude ($t(464) = -0.242$, $p = .809$), behavioural intentions towards the company ($t(464) = -1.621$, $p = .106$) and behavioural intentions towards the cause ($t(442.968) = -0.995$, $p = .320$). This means that H1b, H2b, H3b and H4b are rejected. While statistically insignificant, the future message frame led to slightly higher results in all four variables.

Interaction effects of message framing on attitudes and behavioural intentions. There was no interaction effect between the outcome and target message frames on either company attitude ($F (1, 462) = .408$, $p = .523$), cause attitude ($F (1, 462) = 1.965$, $p = .162$), behavioural intention towards the company ($F (1, 462) = .921$, $p = .338$) nor on behavioural intentions towards the cause ($F (1, 462) = 1.391$, $p = .239$). Thus, H1c, H2c, H3c and H4c are rejected.

Conclusions

This study analysed the effects of outcome (gain vs. loss) and target (current vs. future generation) message framing on cause involvement, attitudes and behavioural intentions. It was

found that overall all four stimuli led to an increase in cause involvement. However, only the outcome message frame showed statistically significant differences, with gain messages being most effective.

The gain message frames are most influential which is in concordance with prospect theory contending that gain frames are more effective in encouraging preventative, cautious behaviour. It is also partially in line with Jacobson et al. (2018) in that gain frames were found to be more effective; however, while Jacobson et al. showed these beneficial effects in relation to behavioural intentions towards the cause, the present study found these effects with regards to cause involvement and company outcome variables (i.e., attitude and behavioural intentions towards the company) but not cause outcome variables (i.e., attitude and behavioural intentions towards the cause).

The result that the two different target frames did not differ in their effects on outcome variables and that no interaction effect between the outcome and target message frames could be detected is in accordance with White et al. (2011) who did not find any significant differences in recycling intentions between distal and proximal construals across gain and loss outcome frames. In contrast, other studies did find an interaction effect (e.g., Chang et al., 2015; Davis, 1995; Loroz, 2007; Segev et al., 2015). The statistical insignificance of the target frame might be a result of the cause itself, as environmental causes are often associated more with the future than the present. This is due to the fact that payoffs and consequences frequently occur at a later point in time, sometimes not even in the consumer's own lifetime, and are thus not immediately observable or felt by the message recipient – something that White et al. (2019) call the "long time horizon". It can be argued that regarding the cause of DC and RC, the effects of the saved or wasted water, trees and energy resources is not immediately visible. Even though the current-frame Facebook posts did state that the effects would have an

immediate impact, this statement might not have been as credible and message recipients might have still subliminally regarded the cause as more future-related. Therefore, future research should investigate a different social cause where the effects are visible immediately (e.g., waste collection). This could help to determine whether the effect of target message frames depends on the promoted cause.

As a limitation of this study, it should be acknowledged that the experimental design of the research led to artificial awareness of the CSR ad and topic (Öberseder et al., 2011). In real life, the context in which ads are shown is usually crowded by other messages and information, and consumers are commonly exposed to ads while they are engaging in purposeful activities, implicating that they are rarely paying close attention to the ad. In the survey, however, respondents were focusing on the stimuli and the questions at hand. This connotes that the effect of CSR ads on attitudes and behavioural intentions might not have been fully captured. As such, it would be of interest to conduct a similar study in the future that compares different media (e.g., display ads vs. social ads) in order to determine whether the hyper-targeting options provided by current technology (e.g., targeting based on search history, location etc.) provide an advantage in evoking awareness and subsequent attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. This is conceivable if these targeting options are used to try to expose the target audience when they are in the right frame of mind (based on current browsing activity) or location (close to a coffee shop).

Lastly, future research could also explore the differences of target frames between local residents and travellers as the latter usually stay for a limited period at the destination and therefore might be more susceptible to present focused target frames.

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