

Consumer Purchasing Decisions on Sustainable Products in Advertising: The Interplay of Message Appeals and Agency-Communion Orientations

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Abstract

Both message appeals and individual characteristics can influence the effectiveness of sustainable product promotions. Applying the agency-communion orientation to the advertising message research context, this study examined the interplay between message appeals and agency-communication orientations in impacting purchase intentions. The findings from a 2 (message appeal: self-interest vs. public-interest message) × 2 (motivational orientation: agency vs. communion) experiment revealed a communion-over-agency effect on consumer purchasing decisions for public-interest message appeals. In the self-interest message condition, we found no statistically significant difference in impact between agency and communion on purchase intentions. In short, we contribute to advertising effectiveness research by showing that agency-communion orientations moderate the effect of message appeals. We also explain the practical implications of these findings for effective sustainable communication in advertisements based on individuals' motivational orientations.

Keywords: Self-interest, Public-interest, Agency, Communion, Advertising, CSR, Branding

1. INTRODUCTION

As environmental degradation has become a more pressing social issue in recent years, emphasis on eco-friendly business practices and products has increased significantly. Sustainability has become a major decision factor in the consumer goods context [1]. In response to this growing demand for sustainability, advertisers have used various message strategies to promote eco-conscious and sustainable products. Two prominent approaches in sustainable product advertising involve appeals to either self- or public-interest [2]. Self-interest advertising messages focus on individual needs and desires, highlighting the personal benefits derived from using a given product or service. In contrast, public-interest messages highlight social benefits, emphasizing societal contributions, environmental sustainability, or social responsibility associated with the product or service. Marketers use these narratives to appeal to the beliefs and characteristics of their target audiences, tying their messaging to efforts to raise public awareness regarding environmental issues.

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The impact of environmental messages in advertising is also influenced by individual consumers' unique characteristics and personalities. Research has shown that individuals' agency-communion orientations lead to different motivational orientations, thereby providing a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals navigate their social worlds [3]. Individuals who are agency-oriented care about themselves and want to distinguish themselves from their communities, displaying traits associated with assertiveness, control, and independence. On the other hand, individuals who are communion-oriented care about other people, adhere to social norms, and want to get along with the groups they are a part of, showcasing traits related to empathy, interpersonal connectedness, and social concerns. Thus, consumers' agency-communion orientations can influence their attitudes and behaviors when exposed to self- or public-interest-based advertising messages.

As such, how do individuals' different agency- and communion-oriented motivations influence their purchase intentions in response to self- and public-interest messages in advertising? Although numerous studies have examined message appeals in advertising, researchers have paid little attention to the combined effects of message strategies and individuals' agency-communion orientations. Thus, this study set out to examine the interplay between message appeals and individuals' motivational orientations using agency and communion. Specifically, this study found that individual's agency-communion orientations moderate the effect of self- and public-interest advertising messages designed to promote sustainable products.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Self-interest and Public-interest Messaging in Advertising

The increasing prominence of sustainability in consumer decision-making makes understanding the role advertising message strategies play in promoting environmentally conscious products imperative. According to previous research, advertisements highlighting the various benefits of purchasing environmentally friendly products and services can motivate consumers to purchase such products and services [4]. Advertising appeals can be used to emphasize these benefits and persuade consumers to make purchasing decisions both at individual (e.g., psychological benefits) and social (e.g., social norm and social capital) levels [5]. In other words, advertising message strategies generally rely on appeals to self- and/or public-interest. In the environmental sustainability context, self-interest appeals focus on the personal benefits consumers can obtain by choosing environmentally friendly products. Research found that emphasizing individual advantages, such as cost savings, health benefits, or enhanced product performance, can positively impact consumers' attitudes and behaviors [6]. For example, some hybrid car ads focus on how much money customers can save when using such cars. This approach aligns with the idea that consumers are more likely to adopt environmentally friendly products when they believe such products will deliver direct personal benefits [7].

Meanwhile, public-interest appeals in this context focus on societal and environmental benefits. Public-interest appeals in sustainable product advertising highlight the broader societal and environmental benefits associated with choosing eco-friendly options. These appeals often emphasize the positive impacts of individual consumer choices on the planet and future generations [8]. The ads usually show that purchasing environmentally friendly products help protect the natural environment and thereby benefit society and other people. For example, hybrid cars ads often focus on fuel-efficiency and underscore that such cars produce fewer emissions than other vehicles. Another study suggested that public-interest appeals can enhance a brand's perceived ethicality and improve attitudes towards the ad in which they are deployed [9].

Several previous studies attempting to identify which benefit appeal is more effective have generated mixed results. Hutton and Markely (1991) suggested that self-interest benefit appeals such as monetary incentives are

more effective in encouraging people to commute to work in an environmentally friendly manner [10]. Likewise, Holmes, Miller, and Lerner (2002) found that framing donations as a self-serving rather than altruistic form of exchange increases consumers' contributions; they argued that while individuals are inclined to assist others through charitable donations, a personal justification is often required to overcome their reluctance [11]. Conversely, Siuki and Webster (2021) found that social media posts employing other-benefit appeals are more effective in increasing various forms of viewer engagement such as sharing, commenting, and liking [12]. Recent studies have attempted to determine which conditions or contexts produce more positive attitudes and behaviors when one of these two appeals are employed. White and Pelozo (2009) found that public interest appeals generate more positive attitudes toward charitable support than self-benefit appeals when public self-image concerns were increased [13]. On the other hand, they found self-benefit appeals are more effective than public-interest appeals when public self-image concerns were minimized. Another recent study suggested that public interest appeals are more effective when public accountability is heightened while self-benefit appeals are more effective in more private settings [14]. Given that various other factors could influence the effectiveness of different types of advertising appeals, this study investigates individual differences in consumers' motivational orientations based on agency and communion. The next section discusses consumers' agency and communion orientations.

2.2. Different Motivational Orientations: Agency and Communion

Bakan (1966) divided human behaviors and personal attributes into two essential categories: agency and communion [15]. These are among the important social motives that guide people's social lives. Agency refers to assertion of the self, experience of ability and achievement, and the tendency to control the environment. Meanwhile, communion refers to social relationships and interdependence, cooperation, and harmony with others. Agency-oriented individuals tend to focus on their individuality and seek to stand out from others. They usually strive for power and status and pursue their own interests, believing achievement and capability are important in their lives. In contrast, communion-oriented people place a high value on interpersonal relationships and harmony, prioritizing social interactions and working cooperatively with others [3].

Agency-communion orientations have been identified as useful tool for understanding consumer behavior. For example, agency-oriented people are more responsive to advertising messages focused on individual benefits such as monetary incentives and saving money. Research found that advertising appeals emphasizing personal benefits are more effective when consumers are in private settings such as considering buying consumer products based on individual needs and preferences [2]. However, that study also showed that consumers in public settings, such as endorsing a non-profit organization that advocates for a specific cause, are more responsive to advertisements that highlight societal or public benefits. When shopping with friends, agency-oriented people spend more money because they want to prove to their peers that they are more capable than they actually are [14]. On the other hand, communion-oriented people tend to spend less than agency-oriented people because they adjust themselves to their friends' behaviors and situations to foster empathy and harmony. Put simply, while agency-oriented people tend to be more self-aware and self-centered, behaving based on selfish rather than social motivations, communion-oriented people are motivated by the desire to benefit others and society. In the advertising context, agency-oriented individuals may respond more favorably to the self-interest-based appeals, while communion-oriented people may respond more favorably to public-interest-based appeals. Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Individuals' motivational orientations moderate the effects of message appeals on purchase intentions.

H1a: When exposed to an ad employing a self-interest message, agency-oriented individuals exhibit

stronger purchase intentions than communion-oriented individuals.

H1b: When exposed to an ad employing a public-interest message, communion-oriented individuals exhibit stronger purchase intentions than agency-oriented individuals.

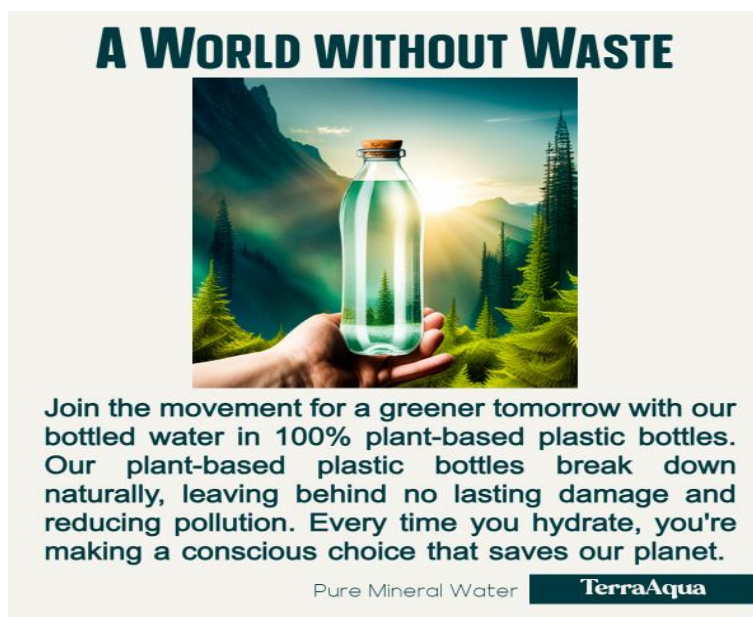
3. EXPERIMENT

3.1. Experimental Design and Stimuli

This study employed a 2 (message appeal: self-interest vs. public-interest message) \times 2 (motivational orientation: agency vs. communion) between-subjects experimental design. We randomly assigned participants to one of the four experimental conditions. We selected a bottled water product for use in the experiment because bottled water consumption has sharply increased in recent years and has an environmental impact up to 3,500 times higher than tap water [16]. Research also demonstrated that bottled water consumption is associated with people's beliefs not only about individual health but also the environment [17]. We developed a fictitious bottled water brand, "TerraAqua," for the advertising stimuli, which consisted of images of bottled water and a distinct set of messages for each message appeal condition. As shown in Figure 1a, the self-interest messages emphasized the product's advantages and health benefits for individual users, whereas Figure 1b shows the public-interest messages focusing on the benefits to society and the planet. The advertising stimuli were created for a social networking site, Instagram—an attractive platform due to its ability to reach audiences who are somewhat engaged.



[Figure 1a. Advertising stimuli: self-interest message]



[Figure 1b. Advertising stimuli: public-interest message]

3.2. Participant Recruitment and Experimental Procedures

We recruited a general adult sample using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online marketplace where individuals sign up to participate in online surveys and often receive monetary incentives. Since most consumers are exposed to diverse advertisements, our use of an MTurk sample ensured real-world generalizability. After excluding six participants who provided inattentive responses, the final sample for our experimental study consisted of 139 adults (Male: 59.4%, MAge = 36.9). Participants began by answering questions designed to manipulate their motivational orientations (agency- or communion-oriented). They then reviewed one of two versions of an Instagram ad for a bottled water product. The ad headlines and text conveyed either a self-interest or public-interest message. After reviewing the ad, participants answered manipulation check, purchase intentions, and demographic questions.

3.3. Measures

To measure purchase intention as a dependent variable, four items were employed using a five-point Likert scale. The items included: "It is likely to buy TerraAqua," "It is probable to buy TerraAqua," "It is possible to buy TerraAqua," and "I will try TerraAqua." (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.81$) [18].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

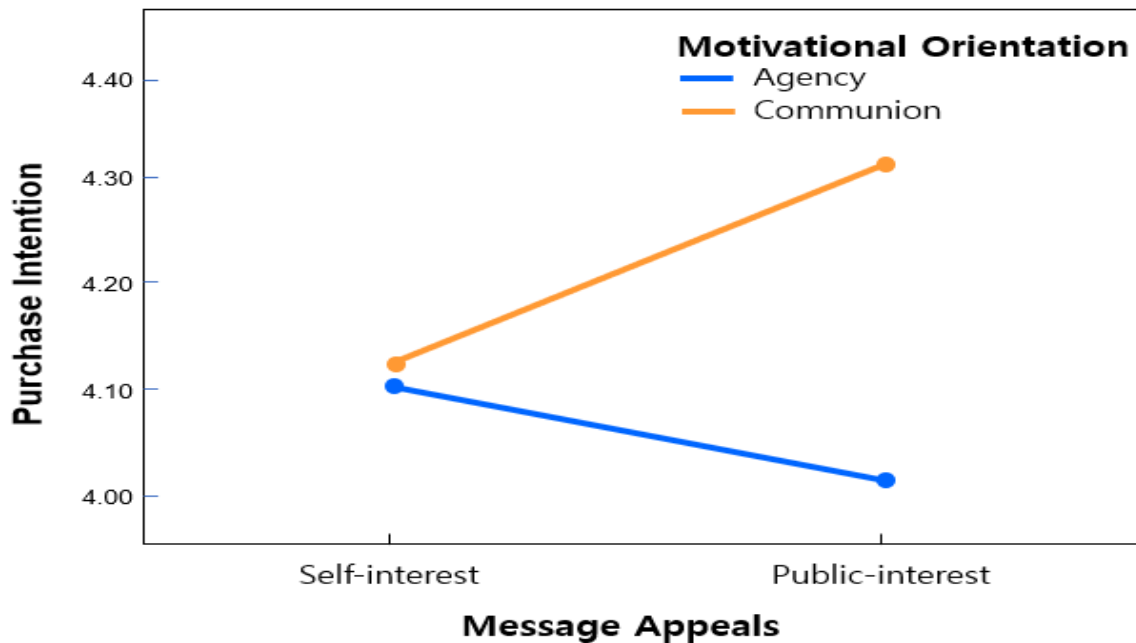
4.1. Manipulation Check

For manipulation check, participants were asked how much they agree or disagree with four statements regarding agency-communion orientations such as "I thought a lot of about something personal," and "I thought a lot about the welfare of others(R)." A *t*-test was conducted and showed that participants in an agency condition perceived that they thought more about something personal and the self than those in a communion

condition ($M_{Agency} = 4.12$, $M_{communion} = 2.59$, $p < .001$). Thus, the manipulation was successful.

4.2. Hypothesis Test

To test the hypothesis, a two-way ANOVA was conducted to measure the influence of the two independent variables (message appeals and motivational orientations) on purchase intention with age, gender, and product involvement as covariates. As shown in Figure 2, the result indicated that there was a significant interaction effect between message appeals and motivational orientations ($F = 4.60$, $p < .05$). A planned contrast test was followed to analyze the differences in means between groups (see Figure 2). In the case of the public-interest ad, the purchase intention was higher for communion-oriented individuals ($M = 4.30$, $SE = .063$) compared to agency-oriented individuals ($M = 4.02$, $SE = .065$). This difference was statistically significant ($p < .05$). For the self-interest ad condition, there was no statistical difference between agency-oriented participants ($M = 4.11$, $SE = .064$) and communion-oriented ones ($M = 4.13$, $SE = .063$). Thus, H1b was supported whereas H1a was not supported.



[Figure 2. The interaction effect between message appeals and motivational orientations]

5. CONCLUSION

Applying individuals' motivational orientations to the advertising message research context, we investigated the mechanism underlying the relationships between self- vs. public-interest message appeals and agency vs. communion orientations to assess consumer purchasing decisions regarding sustainable products. One of the few advertising studies to utilize the agency-communion framework, our analysis showed that public-interest message appeals are more likely to increase the purchase intentions of communion-oriented individuals than agency-oriented individuals. Research has tended to assume that communion is more strongly associated with consideration of others than agency. Consistent with this assumption, because public-interest appeals highlight environmental benefits, which are related to concerns about others who can be affected by environment, we found that ads appealing to public-interest generated stronger purchase intentions in

communion-oriented individuals than in agency-oriented individuals. As communion reflects other-focused characteristics such as sincerity, honesty, tolerance, and kindness, communion-oriented individuals may perceive public-interest environmental messages as more sincere and honest, generating more favorable purchase intentions in them than in agency-oriented individuals.

Meanwhile, although we found that agency-communion orientations moderate the effect of self- and public-interest message appeals, our analysis showed no significant difference between agency- and communion-oriented individuals in the case of self-interest message appeals. We speculate that self-interest message appeals such as health benefits in the sustainable product promotion context may not resonate with individuals who have low involvement with health enhancing behavior or who may not see the connection between selecting a sustainable product and health benefits.

Given the increasing popularity of promoting sustainable products by organizations with various aims, we show empirical evidence that individuals' motivational orientations matter in the use of different message appeals. Managerially, our findings shed light on how advertisers can address consumers' individual traits by focusing on motivational orientations when developing different message appeals. For example, identifying and mobilizing communion-oriented consumers would be essential in efforts to highlight other-benefits such as societal impacts when promoting sustainable behavior such as practicing sustainable eating or recycling.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. It used advertising messages that showed the environmental and health benefits stemming from the use of an environmentally friendly bottled water. Some consumers may be drawn to sustainable product advertising messages out of a desire to satisfy non-health related personal interests, including security and fashion. To enhance the generalizability of our findings, future studies should consider messages promoting both sustainable behaviors and sustainable products.

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