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What's Morality Got To Do With It?
How Gender and Worldviews Affect Advertising Processing and Preference for Charitable Appeals

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This study examines the use of the morality construct as a mediating factor in determining how gender affects ad processing and ad preference for pro-social charity appeals. Past research conducted on gender and advertising has suggested that “males and females may use significantly different processing strategies and/or prefer to process different types of ad claims” (Darley and Smith, 1995, p. 42). Specifically, researchers have found that females are often subjective and intuitive processors (Broverman, Klaiber, Kobayashi, and Vogel, 1968) who tend to integrate the pieces of available information (Meyers-Levy and Maheswaran, 1991). Conversely, males are more influenced by objectivity (Haas, 1979) and utilize analytical and logical processing strategies (Broverman et al. 1968).

Differences in processing strategies are also reflected in language usage and style (Entwistle and Garvey 1972; Lakoff 1975; Stern 1997). Stern (1997) explains how “women’s speech reflects cultural imperatives, calling for niceness, politeness, ladylike expression and concern for the feelings of others” (p. 36). These variations in ways of thinking and speaking are likely indicative of socialization practices (Meyers-Levy and Sternthal 1991) and echo differences found between the sexes’ worldviews or moral outlooks (Jensen, McGhie and Jensen 1991). Studies have found, for example, that morality from a male perspective tends to resemble the Kantian notion that emphasis should be placed on individual rights, freedom of choice, and justice in making moral decisions (Kohlberg, 1976). However, a more feminine morality relies on relations and connections with others and an emphasis on caring (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1984, 1988).

This study uses morality as a means of understanding how gender influences processing and advertising preference. Specifically, it is predicted that morality mediates the relationships between gender and processing. In fact, Kristiansen and Hotte (1996, p. 87) suggest that “these two processes of moral reasoning may have important implications for our understanding of value-attitude-behavior relations.” In addition, a “special type of product” -- in the form of appeals for donations to cancer research -- is used as the ad stimuli. As Stern (1997) and Darley and Smith (1995) have suggested, gender differences may be greater for some product categories than others. Such charity appeals are likely to elicit considerations of moral responsibility and are, therefore, relevant for this research and for the study of gender differences.

The construct used to measure morality is the World View Questionnaire (Jensen, McGhie and Jensen, 1991; Stander and Jensen, 1993), which is a 40 forced-choice adjective pair task based on the work of Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1984) and Belenky et al. (1986). Each pair represents bipolar adjectives – one from the caring orientation and one from the justice orientation. This measure, along with two different charity appeals (one containing caring themes and an emphasis on helping others and the other focusing on helping
Overall results confirmed prior research about gender differences in morality. Women were significantly more caring than men. Women also tended to prefer the caring prosocial appeal to the "help yourself" appeal, whereas men tended to prefer the help yourself appeal over the caring appeal. Further, this study tested for the mediating role of morality on advertising preference. Following the testing methodology outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), this study showed that morality is a mediator for the role of gender on advertising choice. When both gender and morality are used in a logistic regression to predict advertising choice, morality is the principal explanatory construct.

Overall, this research suggests that the use of morality as an explanatory construct should be more prevalent in the advertising and consumer behavior literature, particularly in cases where moral views or responsibilities are deemed relevant (i.e., prosocial charity appeals). In this case, it offered support for the supposition that appeals matching one's underlying moral values would increase ad attractiveness as well. Furthermore, in the context of this study, the results suggest that the effect of gender on advertising preference is explained through the mediating role of personality, bringing more evidence to the social/psychological nature of the gender construct.