



“A moral boost for us or a moral boost for me?” - how self and other-oriented drivers of sustainable behaviour influence vicarious moral licensing

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ABSTRACT

The author explores an avenue of inhibiting vicarious moral licensing (i.e., one's ethically or environmentally inconsistent behaviour, resulting from close others' good deeds) via marketing messages' shift from praising consumers' past good deeds to focusing on their motivation (i.e., self vs other-oriented drivers of sustainable behaviour) that led to them. Across three experiments and one comparative cross-study, the author demonstrates that emphasising consumers' motivation leads to consistent, compliant behaviour. Specifically, messages that emphasise other-oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour led to positive consistency (compliance; i.e., a positive initial (observed) behaviour that leads to subsequent positive behaviour) in Study 2 (political affiliation). On the other hand, moral licensing manifested in Study 1, which the author associated with an in-group type of moderate salience (academic affiliation). The author thus investigated possible explanations and the underlying mechanism of this phenomenon with a comparative study – where the in-group type (i.e., school vs political affiliation) was confirmed to be a significant moderator (stronger group identification by other-oriented message among participants sharing political affiliation, compared to academic affiliation). The author summarises the work with a brief discussion concerning limitations and future research directions.

Keywords: moral licensing, sustainable product choice, sustainable consumption, marketing communication, consumer behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Would some consumers opt for a fuel-hungry car after a prior display of environmentally friendly efforts? Or would they rather prefer to continue their sustainable efforts and choose an electric vehicle? When confronted with such questions, one could ask: why (and when) would an individual, despite such a manifestation of environmental goodwill, select products which are the polar opposite? In search of an answer, we would eventually learn about a phenomenon known as moral licensing - an individual's indulgence in ethically or environmentally inconsistent behaviour as a result of their prior good deed (Mullen and Monin, 2016). There are multiple drivers of moral licensing - for example, consumers' conflicting consumption goals or lack of identification with an environmental cause, which makes it easier for an individual to behave inconsistently and engage in licensing (Meijers, 2014). Besides these individual factors, prior research also suggests that brands' extensive usage of pro-environmental messages that praise customers for good deeds can subsequently increase consumers' self-indulgent behaviours that are not environmentally friendly (Kouchaki and Jami, 2018). However, is it possible to emphasize consumers' good deeds without licensing them to behave unsustainably as a consequence? Both marketers and policymakers would likely prefer to maximize their pro-environmental campaigns' efficiency (White et al. 2019) and yet, the current research does not provide an explicit answer to this question. Therefore, in this research, we investigate a communication approach that could potentially inhibit the occurrence of consumers' licensing behaviour in the sustainable consumption context. Namely: highlighting whether consumers' prior good deed was driven by self- or other-oriented motivations. Furthermore, we look at a specific form of moral licensing - vicarious moral licensing, which refers to the incorporation of others' moral behaviour as their own, which in turn can also license people to behave less morally (Kouchaki, 2011). Nevertheless, what if an individual is aware of others' motivation - namely, that their good deeds are facilitated by either self- or other-oriented benefits? In this research, we propose that a message's emphasis on other-oriented motivational drivers (vs. self) can inhibit vicarious moral licensing. On a theoretical level, this paper explores the vicarious moral licensing effect by investigating ways to inhibit it. From a managerial perspective, it offers new insights regarding promotional materials, as to mitigate the risk of moral licensing. This knowledge would be useful for various entities (e.g., NGOs, corporations) with a socially responsible goal in mind.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self- Versus Other-Oriented Sustainable Messages

Messages that praise and highlight the benefits of sustainable behaviours are a crucial tool in the effort to push consumers towards more sustainable behaviours (Green and Peloza, 2014). While sustainable behaviours are generally desired, consumers' motivation to engage in such activities varies; they may be driven by either self or other-oriented benefits. The matter of which of the drivers should be included within a message (as the better choice in leading consumers towards pro-environmental actions) is still being debated in the literature (Green and Peloza, 2014). Self-oriented messages stating personal gain are considered effective by many researchers (Green and Peloza, 2014). An example of such a benefit in the environmental domain can be money savings on fuel - using a hybrid car reduces fuel consumption (Green and Peloza, 2014). Other-oriented messages emphasize the gains of others (e.g., a cleaner environment for all, more resources for the future generations) instead, based on a notion that socially responsible actions are collective, social in their nature, both in

terms of effort and outcome (Webb et al., 2008). According to this array of research (e.g., Griskevicius et al., 2010), such appeals are more effective when marketers try to induce environmentally friendly behaviours among consumers. Regardless of the messages' orientation, mentioning one's or others' good deeds may subsequently lead an individual to unsustainable behaviours *via* moral boost for the self-concept (i.e., moral licensing; Kouchaki and Jami, 2018).

(Vicarious) Moral Licensing and Moral Consistency

Moral licensing can be defined as a non-conscious effect that provides the self-concept with a moral boost, while reducing the negative self-attributions connected to such behaviour, increasing the preference for an unethical action (Khan and Dhar, 2006). Moral licensing has been reported in multiple domains, including the sustainable consumption context. For example, Gholamzadehmir et al. (2019) showed that after consumers recall their previous pro-environmental behaviours, they were less likely to look for information regarding their carbon footprint. Furthermore, licensing often arises when people experience a conflict of goals, such as one between self-interest and doing what is morally decent (Mullen and Monin, 2016). A variant of licensing behaviour that is of interest is vicarious moral licensing – an individual's incorporation of others' moral behaviour as their own and subsequently, licensing (Kouchaki, 2011). Vicarious moral licensing is documented in various contexts, including corporate social responsibility (Kouchaki and Jami, 2018), donation (Herd et al., 2022), and sustainable consumption. Also, there are certain prerequisites for vicarious moral licensing to happen. According to Kouchaki (2011), those vicarious processes occur only if an individual assumes a shared identity with a person whose behaviour he or she observes. However, there seems to be an interesting caveat - prior research suggests that for licensing to occur in the environmental domain, an individual shouldn't strongly identify with a cause (Clot et al., 2014). Specifically, Meijers (2014) found that participants' self-reported pro-environmental identity reduces the negative effect of imagining buying environmentally friendly shoes or clothing on their subsequent pro-environment attitudes and behaviours (Mullen and Monin, 2016). Whilst Meijers (2014) refers to identification with a cause, we reinforce this with a notion that shared identity may lead an individual to model their behaviour based on close others' actions (Bandura, 1977) – and as such, share values and causes alike. Our argument is somewhat akin to Fishbach et al. (2006), who claimed that Monin & Miller's (2001) experiment would show consistency instead of licensing – that is, if individuals would connect their initial behaviour to their values and beliefs, “they are more likely to infer commitment to egalitarian values and avoid discriminatory action” (Fishbach et al. 2006, p. 240). Nevertheless, the prospect of altering consumers' identification processes via an emphasis on others' motivational drivers was largely unaddressed in the literature – and we assume that it may determine said consumers' subsequent choice between consistency and licensing. For vicarious moral licensing to occur, the observer and actor must be psychologically connected – that is, hold a view of being psychologically close to someone or have a sense of shared identity (Goldstein and Cialdini, 2007). According to the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), a person's self-concept is primarily based on belonging to a particular group. As a result, an observer's level of identification with an actor dictates how much the actor's behaviour affects the observer (Goldstein and Cialdini, 2007). However, does in-group members' motivation determine observers' level of identification? Current research provides evidence that it can indeed – for example, according to Ellemers et al., (1997) groups often value cooperation, altruism, and the well-being of their members. Other-oriented actions validate and reinforce these values and norms, enhancing the perceived attractiveness and importance of the group to its members. Additionally, when group

members perceive others as acting for the group's (i.e., others) benefit, it can enhance the perceived value and importance of the group (Tyler and Blader, 2000) and in turn, foster stronger in-group identification. Thus, we propose that mentioning others' self (e.g., recycling to save one's own money) versus other-oriented motivations for sustainable behaviour (e.g., recycling to save resources for future generations) appeals induce different levels of vicarious moral licensing. Furthermore, we argue that (stronger) identification with one's group does not necessarily need to cause licensing – Bandura (1977) suggested that observing how and what other group members do may lead one to model their behaviour accordingly; for example, if one observes other-oriented, altruistic behaviour, they are likely to model similar behaviour. It can be assumed that other-oriented behaviours can serve as a model for in-group members, leading them to adopt similar behaviours. In contrast, self-oriented behaviours, especially if perceived as violating group norms or threatening group cohesion, might not serve as strong behavioural models (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, internalization of a group's norms and values may lead to consistent behaviour (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Thus, we argue that mentioning other- (vs. self) oriented benefits (that drive others' sustainable behaviour) leads to stronger identification with those whom sustainable behaviour was mentioned and thus, largely inhibits vicarious licensing. Together, we propose that:

H1: Mentioning other (vs. self) oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour leads to more consistent behaviour (i.e., making choices compliant with the group)

H2: The effect in H1 happens because mentioning other (vs. self) oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour causes higher self-other identification (i.e.,

Moderating role of an in-group type

Not all groups are the same when it comes to their impact on one's self-concept (Cameron, 2004); while being a student is a temporary role of moderate salience (Obst and White, 2005), belonging to a group that in an embodiment of one's values and beliefs (e.g., political affiliation) has a more significant effect (Obst and White, 2005). Thus, we propose that:

H3: The effect of mentioning other (vs. self) oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour on self-other identification is moderated by in-group type (i.e., stronger group identification by other-oriented message among participants sharing political affiliation (vs. academic affiliation))

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We conducted a series of experiments to test the hypotheses. The first experiment aims to test H1-2, using school affiliation as a basis of an individual's in-group identification, whereas the second experiment intends to replicate the findings of the first experiment, but using political affiliation as a basis of an individual in-group identification. A 90% confidence interval was taken - as a relatively small sample was acquired for Study 1 and with the licensing effect being notoriously difficult to capture (Blanken et al., 2015).

Study 1 – Inhibition of Vicarious Moral Licensing

In Study 1, we test the prediction that other (vs. self) -oriented promotional message inhibits vicarious moral licensing. First, a pretest was conducted (N = 90; a single factor (appeal type: praise vs control) between-subjects design) to verify whether vicarious moral licensing occurs

in the sustainable context. The participants read a summary of a fictitious study regarding the students' sustainable behaviour in Europe. In the praise condition, the students' business school was leading in terms of students' sustainable behaviour. In the control condition, the summary concluded that their school was not more sustainable than any other business school in Europe. After they answered several filler questions, the degree of the participants' identification as business students was measured (4-item scale adapted from Doosje et al., (1995). Then, participants saw a pair of skincare products. Their tasks were to choose the preferred item, based on its visualisation and the information provided. The pair consisted of a cream that had sustainable, environmentally-friendly traits and one that was less environmentally friendly, but superior in terms of its quality. Environmental attitudes scale (EAS) was used to obtain information on their attitudes towards the environment. A pairwise comparison indicated that participants in the credentials condition ($M = .58$) were significantly less likely to choose a sustainable skin cream, compared to those in the control condition ($M = .77$), $z = -1.79$, $p = .07$). A message aimed to praise past deeds of an individual's group results in vicarious moral licensing, as one's self-concept receives a moral boost (moral credentials via others' sustainable behaviour), increasing the preference for an unsustainable product - we can conclude that the vicarious moral licensing indeed can occur in this context. Moving onto the experiment proper - the participants were 100 undergraduate students, recruited from campuses of a major, European business school. Study 1 follows a single factor (appeal type: control vs self-benefit vs other-benefit) between-subjects experimental design, with participants randomly assigned to either condition. Participants read a similar excerpt about the sustainable behaviour of students in their school. The difference was the new excerpt proposed that the students' sustainable behaviour was fuelled by either self-benefit orientation (e.g., a discount for public transportation) or other-benefit orientation (e.g., cleaner environment). In the control condition, the excerpt stated that the participants' school is not more sustainable than any other business school in Europe. After responding to several filler items and an in-group identification scale, the participants saw a pair of skincare products only (as in the pretest) and were asked to choose between the more sustainable and the higher quality product. While a post hoc, margins-based pairwise comparison (see Appendix A) indicated that participants in the other-oriented condition ($M = .70$) were more likely to choose a sustainable skin cream, compared to those in the self-oriented condition ($M = .56$), $p = 0.3$, the result is not significant; instead, we observe balancing (i.e., initial behaviour pushes the target behaviour in an opposite direction; when we compare both conditions with control ($M = .76$)) and a significant difference between self-oriented and control conditions, $p = .08$, which leads us to the conclusion that there is a moral licensing effect at play (an initial positive behaviour led to negative target behaviour (negative balancing)).

Study 2 – Inhibition of Vicarious Moral Licensing & Political Affiliation

In Study 2, we replicate the first experiment's findings, i.e., we test our predictions that self (vs. other)-oriented promotional message facilitates vicarious moral licensing, using political affiliation as a basis of in-group identification. Study 2 is a single factor (appeal type: self vs other-benefit) between-subjects design, with participants randomly assigned to either condition. A control condition was also included. Participants were 251 U.S. citizens, recruited through Prolific. Akin to Study 1, the participants were provided with a summary of a fictitious study that brings new findings regarding sustainable behaviour and political affiliation. Participants indicated their political affiliation (Republican or Democratic) and were shown a summary matching their choice (i.e., with voters of the same political affiliation presented as more sustainable) –condition-dependent, participants were also provided with

information regarding either self or other-oriented drivers of their fellow voters' sustainable behaviour. In the control condition, the summary concluded that political affiliation does not predict sustainable behaviour in any way. Afterwards, the participants answered several filler questions and an in-group identification (Doosje et al. (1995) for political affiliation measure and afterwards, they saw a pair of skincare products and were asked to choose between the more sustainable and the higher quality product. A post hoc, margins-based pairwise comparison indicated that participants in the other-oriented condition ($M = .84$) were significantly more likely to choose a sustainable product, compared to those in the control ($M = .70$; $z = 2.20$; $p = .03$) and self-oriented conditions ($M = .76$; $z = 1.37$; $p = 0.1$); the comparison did not show a significant difference between control and self-oriented condition ($z = 0.78$; $p = 0.4$). Additionally, we verified if the effect holds when we look at orientation per levels of political affiliation. Republicans in the other-oriented condition seemed more likely to choose a sustainable product ($M = .70$) than those in self-oriented ($M = .60$; $z = .72$, $p = .47$) and control ($M = .56$; $z = 1.02$, $p = .31$) conditions – the results, while insignificant, do resemble the mean distribution of the single-factor design results. Similarly, looking at the interaction of Democratic and message orientation presents us with a similar distribution of means; other-oriented Democrats are significantly more likely to choose a sustainable product ($M = .90$) than those in the control ($M = .76$; $z = 2.02$; $p = .04$) condition; the comparison of self-oriented condition ($M = .82$) with other-oriented ($z = 1.21$, $p = .22$) and control ($z = .84$, $p = .40$) conditions didn't yield significant output. The results of Study 2 partially support our claim - the inclusion of consumers' motivation for their sustainable behaviours did lead to a positive consistency among those participants who reviewed other-oriented messages (compared to self-oriented messages). It can be assumed that other-oriented behaviours can serve as a model for in-group members, leading them to adopt similar behaviours. In contrast, self-oriented behaviours, especially if perceived as violating group norms or threatening group cohesion, might not serve as strong behavioural models (Bandura, 1977). However, there's no statistical evidence for neither partial nor full mediation effect (product of indirect effect paths (ab) is insignificant ($p > 0.7$)) – that is, knowing what drives others' sustainable behaviour doesn't seem to cause neither stronger (when subjected to self ($M = 3.62$) or other-oriented; $M = 3.72$) or weaker in-group identification, compared to the control group ($M = 3.57$).

Study 3 – Moderating role of an in-group type (underlying mechanism)

Study 3 was conceived *via* comparative, cross-study design (i.e., based on the Study 1 and 2 datasets) - pursuing a literature-based assumption of an in-group type salience in the process of self and other identification formation. First, we conducted a two-sample t-test with unequal variances; a mean comparison of U.S. voters ($M = 3.63$, $SD = .05$) and students ($M = 2.72$, $SD = .13$) on the strength of their in-group identification was highly significant ($p < .001$), which suggests that the two samples differ in terms of how strong is their identification with a group. Following this notion, a moderated mediation model (see Appendix B for the theoretical and statistical models) was set up to see whether the effect of the message with a self or other-oriented motivation on the strength of in-group identification depends on the in-group type. A series (logistic and linear) regressions were fit in generalized structural equations model to test this assumption – the results have shown that interaction terms' coefficients ($b3$) on the mediator are significant ($t = -4.94$; -4.62 , $p < .000$), which suggests that whether the message contained self vs other-oriented motivational drivers of behaviour or not had a different effect on the extent to which they identify with their group, depending on which group type they belong to. Pairwise comparisons of predictive margins revealed that type of affiliation (academic vs. political) significantly moderated the effect of self and other-

oriented message framing on group identification (i.e., stronger group identification by other-oriented message among participants sharing political affiliation ($t(319) = 7.50$; $p < .000$; compared to academic affiliation), as well as self-oriented message ($t(319) = 5.71$; $p < .000$). The results indicate that an in-group type determines how strongly individuals may associate themselves with a group they belong to – and thus, how likely they are to model their behaviour based on the affiliation. With evidence for the moderation effect, we nevertheless cannot claim a moderated mediation effect to be present, as (among other conditions) none of the indirect effects are statistically significant at either level of the in-group type.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This work's theoretical contributions are twofold. First, it offers new insights regarding licensing and consistency - confirming our hypothesis (H1) that mentioning other (vs. self) oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour leads to more consistent behaviour (i.e., making choices compliant with the group) in Study 2. Second, we found evidence that the effect of mentioning other (vs. self) oriented drivers of others' sustainable behaviour on self-other identification is moderated by in-group type (i.e., stronger group identification by other-oriented message among participants sharing political affiliation (vs. academic affiliation) behaviour (H3) in Study 3.

As we found no evidence for the mediating role of in-group identification in our models, we turned to compliance with group norms (i.e., salient moral aspect of social identity, H4a & H4b; see Appendix C for a new study (data collection ongoing), as results of Study 3 led us to conclude that social identities vary in their moral impact and it affects the extent to which one complies with norms of a particular group and models behaviour based on other members' actions (and their either self or other-oriented nature). Nevertheless, further research could explore the possibility of including different moderators of in-group identification to verify its suitability (or lack thereof) - for example, individuals' desire to adopt and differentiate from other people. As affiliation (i.e., need to belong) and differentiation (i.e., need for uniqueness) are two competing social motives, individuals alternate between the two, oftentimes by using different social identities. Some individuals have a stronger propensity towards one or the other (i.e., uniqueness or affiliation). According to Thielmann et al. (2020), traits that are strongly linked to values are highly relevant to one's identity (also Lee et al., 2009) and individuals tend to particularly rate others as similar to themselves on these traits. If we apply this logic to uniqueness and affiliation phenomena, we could say that uniqueness-seeking (individuals are more likely to rate others (highly) who display similar traits (and thus, identify with them more).

From an applied perspective, marketing practitioners could now better adapt their communication strategies – an ability to discern if a particular advertising message is going to facilitate consistent, compliant behaviour while pushing consumers towards sustainable consumption may prove vital for a marketing campaign's success.

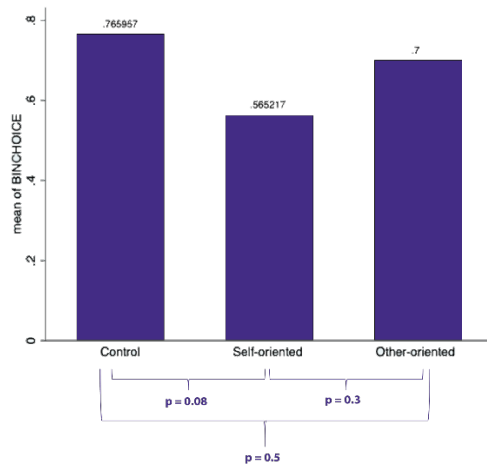
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APPENDIX A

Sustainable product preference among students



Sustainable product preference among US voters

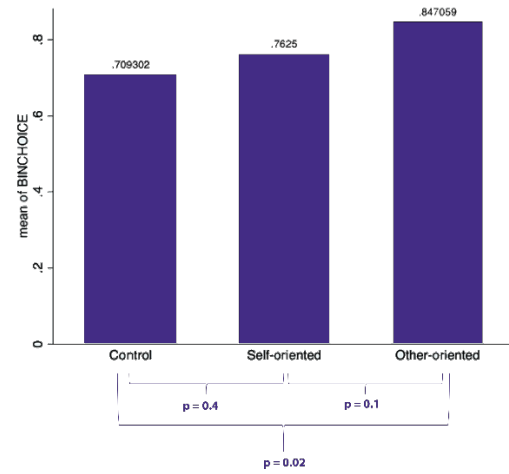


Figure 1. Bar charts with pairwise mean comparisons (Study 1 and Study 2)

APPENDIX B

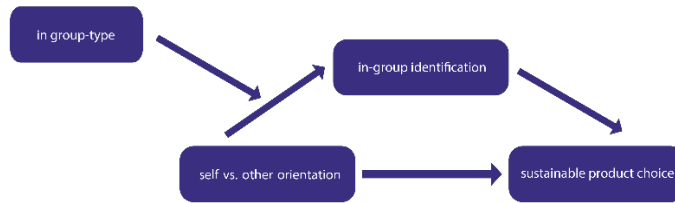


Figure 2. Moderated mediation theoretical model

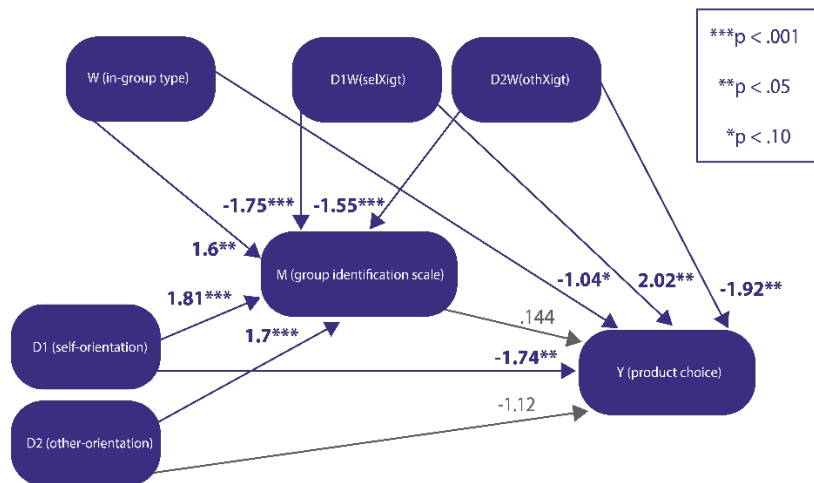


Figure 3. Moderated mediation statistical model

APPENDIX C

The role of inherent identity salience in consistent/compliant behaviour

We state that individuals' perceptions of themselves are often intertwined with their membership in various social groups. These groups can range from temporary affiliations, like being a student, to more enduring identities, such as cultural, political or professional associations. The salience of these identities can significantly influence behaviour, attitudes, and self-concept (Obst and White, 2005). The literature on social influence and compliance (e.g., Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004), suggests that social norms and the desire to be accepted within a group can drive individuals to conform to group behaviours (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) – especially when group identity is salient (Oyserman, 2009). We propose that this salience, or rather, a salient moral (e.g., norms' and attitudes congruence) aspect of a particular identity leads to increased compliance with group norms and values, in turn increasing the probability of adopting members' behaviours as one's own. Specifically, we look at academic (as a temporary role of moderate salience (Obst and White, 2005)) and generational affiliation - individuals may psychologically identify more strongly with their generational peers due to similar life experiences and challenges, whereas academic identities may be more role-specific and tied to an institution (usually local). Furthermore, generational cohorts, particularly younger ones (such as Generation Z), are often at the forefront of social movements and activism, which can be deeply intertwined with their identity formation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4a: The salience of group membership will be higher for the generational affiliation (vs academic affiliation) – which would be further strengthened in the other-oriented condition (vs self-oriented)

H4b: Higher salience of group membership will lead to higher compliance with the group norms, thus resulting in consistent behaviour

Study 4 – The role of inherent identity salience in consistent/compliant behaviour*

A pretest was conducted (N = 31) to investigate the role of identity type in the context of consistent/compliant behaviour. The participants responded to a single-item social identification scale (SISI; Postmes et al, 2013), measuring the extent to which they identify with their generation and school – the order of appearance of either generational or educational identity measure was randomised. Afterwards, depending on which identity was presented first, the participants evaluated corresponding (also randomised) statements, focusing on a specific aspect (i.e., moral, intellectual and social) of the identity in question. Study 4 builds on both the theory, comparative study's result and pretest - and is based on a 2 (appeal type: self vs other-benefit) x 2 (in-group type: generation vs academic) between-subjects design (five experimental conditions in total; control condition included). We aim to recruit up to 200 undergraduate students from campuses of a major business school. Akin to Studies 1 and 2, the participants are being provided with a summary of a fictitious study that brings new findings regarding sustainable behaviour and group affiliation. Participants are being randomly allocated to one of five conditions and shown an excerpt matching their condition (i.e., with members of the same identity group presented as more sustainable) – furthermore, condition-dependent, participants are also provided with information regarding either self or other-oriented drivers of their fellow in-group members' sustainable behaviour.

In the control condition, the summary is unrelated, displaying the top five destinations for summer holidays within a fictitious article. At the time of sending the revised version of this paper, 147 responses were collected (with 24 of those pending/partially complete).