

*Chapter 11*

**BRANDING CONSUMER WELL-BEING AND  
MOTIVATING PROSOCIAL CONSUMPTION.**

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**ABSTRACT**

As consumers look for opportunities to benefit others and society in their touch points with brands, businesses have the chance to incorporate prosocial consumption into their branding. In this chapter, we approach branding from a consumer decision-making perspective that explores the diverse influences and challenges in branding prosocial consumption. In doing so, we identify the motivations that drive prosocial consumer behavior and highlight the dilemmas and opportunities that marketers face in associating a brand with prosocial causes. The current review aims to stimulate more research in this area while also providing actionable suggestions for managers who aspire to make consumer and societal well-being a component of their brand.

**Keywords:** Branding; Prosocial Consumption; Altruism.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Neil Blumenthal, Andrew Hunt, David Gilboa, and Jeffrey Raider founded an eyeglass company and named it by combining the names of two characters, Warby Pepper and Zagg Parker, from Jack Kerouac writings. From the very beginning, Warby Parker had a social cause. Recognizing that almost one billion people lacked access to eyeglasses, Warby Parker partnered with a nonprofit company to ensure that for every pair of glasses sold, a pair is distributed to someone in need. This win-win situation has been central to Warby Parker's branding. There are many other examples of prosocial brands like Warby Parker, some successful and some not. In this chapter, we approach branding from a consumer decision making and prosocial perspective that explores the diverse influences, challenges and opportunities that marketers face in associating brands with prosocial behaviors.

People often engage in behaviors that are costly to themselves and benefit others. When they volunteer, donate to charities or political organizations, donate blood, purchase more expensive hybrid vehicles, or conserve energy, people interact with brands that are directly or indirectly associated with these behaviors. Moreover, consumers often purchase products that are linked to causes, like Warby Parker, or brands like Patagonia that promote their prosocial values in all that they do. These prosocial behaviors represent critical brand touch points that may be driven by more egoistic (Campbell 1975) or more altruistic (Batson and Powell 2003; Eisenberg and Miller 1987) motives. Most generally, altruistic prosocial behaviors focus on others while egoistic prosocial behaviors focus on the self and the social and self-rewards obtained from doing a prosocial act. For instance, cobranding with a charity can focus consumers' attention on the benefits that others will gain from the charity leading them to purchase for more altruistic reasons. Conversely, the same cobranding can focus consumers' attention on the benefits that they themselves would attain (e.g., status). Understanding the motives driving prosocial behavior is essential to successful branding in this domain. In the sections that follow, we will explore branding implications of three consumer motives that are more egoistic – moral identity, social norms, and other dimensions of self- and social identity. We will follow with two consumer motives for prosocial behavior that are more altruistic – empathy and promotion of justice. We will then discuss how consumers make inferences regarding how egoistic and altruistic a prosocial brand is and how marketers can influence this process to promote their brands and consumers' prosocial behaviors.

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## **MORE EGOISTIC DRIVERS OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

### **Moral identity**

One of the main reasons why consumers engage in prosocial purchasing behaviors is to maintain or promote an image of themselves as moral people. Moral identity has two distinct dimensions: a private dimension that motivates consumers to behave consistently with their own moral traits and goals for self-signaling rewards; and a public dimension that motivates consumers to present a positive image of themselves to others or for social signaling rewards (Aquino and Reed 2002). A consumer may choose Warby Parker eyeglasses because this choice reinforces her own self-image as a moral person or because other people will think she is a moral person when they learn about her new eyeglasses. There is a significant amount of research that has investigated how (private) self-signaling and (public) impression management motivations influence consumers' willingness to engage in prosocial behaviors. Because different psychological processes are associated with the two dimensions of moral identity, some marketing levers, such as self-benefit appeals or asking for a low-cost act of support before requesting more substantial actions, are more effective in private while other levers, such as other-benefit appeals or recognizing prosocial behavior, work best in public touch points (Kristofferson, White, and Peloza 2014; White and Peloza 2009; Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino 2013).

The motivational power of the private dimension of moral identity is rooted in the experience of moral elevation, which is a positive emotion that drives individuals to act prosocially (Aquino, McFerran, and Laven 2011). In addition to this positive motivation, making consumers aware of a potential discrepancy between their internal ethical standards and actual behavior motivates prosocial behaviors through an alternative mechanism: avoiding the guilt associated with self-discrepancy (Higgins 1987). Marketing communications that heighten consumers' desire to live up to their own ethical standards increase preferences for ethical brands, especially when the message is subtle (Peloza, White, and Shang 2013).

The role of guilt in motivating prosocial behaviors has interesting implications to brands, particularly because doing good deeds licenses consumers to behave contrary to their own moral standards (Khan and Dhar 2006). The moral licensing effect is especially relevant in product categories associated with consumption guilt, such as hedonic products. Guilt-sensitive consumers, who typically avoid consuming hedonic products, change their pattern of behavior when these products

are linked with a charitable donation, indulging at least as much as consumers with lower sensitivity to guilt (Zemack-Rugar et al. 2016). Similarly, consumers who bring their own bags to the grocery store are more likely to purchase indulgent foods than those who don't (Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015). Counter-intuitively, moral licensing effects can also benefit society. For instance, pairing hedonic products with prosocial appeals seems to stimulate consumers to engage in prosocial behaviors, because consumers feel less negatively about themselves after consuming tempting products if they contribute to a cause (Savary, Goldsmith, and Dhar 2015).

Activating the private dimension of moral identity also brings important risks to brands because many consumption behaviors signal goals that are contrary to what is best for society (Schor 1999). This is particularly true in some product categories, such as luxury, where this conflict is most salient. When a luxury brand communicates corporate social responsibility activities, the conflict between the goal of dominance over other people and resources, which is associated with luxury brands, and the goal of protecting society characteristic of corporate social responsibility, generates a sense of disfluency that results in negative attitudes toward the brand (Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati 2012).

Activating the second dimension of moral identity, the public dimension that involves impression management motivations, can also hurt the brand if the impression-management goal is made salient. Conspicuous consumption of luxury goods has long been a subject of study (Veblen 1899) and recent research has uncovered that conspicuous green consumption can serve similar impression-management motives (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Van den Bergh 2010). Griskevicius et al. (2010) show that status and impression management motives can drive preferences for green products over superior non-green alternatives. However, in a similar way as conspicuous consumption of luxury goods sometimes backfires (Ferraro, Kirmani, and Matherly 2013), engaging in prosocial behaviors conspicuously can also backfire on consumers. Consumers who use conspicuous prosocial brands in an attempt to make others perceive them as generous may actually generate the opposite effect, if the conspicuous act does not bring new information to observers (Berman et al. 2015). When others don't know about a consumer's prosocial behavior, conspicuous consumption makes the behavior known which may indeed generate a perception of generosity, but once it is already known the effect is reversed because bragging goes directly against the image of generosity that consumers are trying to convey (Berman et al. 2015).

The public dimension of moral identity is associated not only with impression management motives, but also with the social reinforcement that other people's opinions, comments and actions offer to the self (Winterich, Mittal, and Aquino

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2013). This aspect of social influence is typically codified in social norms, to which we turn next.

### **Social norms**

Norms provide information specifying what should be done or is expected of a person in a particular position in society. Two types of norms are described in the literature – descriptive and injunctive norms. Descriptive norms refer to what is common or typically done whereas injunctive norms refer to what is approved or disapproved. Most of the research in this area has focused on social-norms marketing campaigns and other consumers’ normative behaviors to infer descriptive norms changing behaviors. Social norms marketing campaigns have been used to change alcohol consumption, drug use, eating disorders, and energy consumption (Schultz et al. 2007; Meng and Trudel 2017). For example, using field studies investigating conservation behavior of hotel guests, Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius (2008) found that marketing appeals using descriptive norms (that 75% of guests reuse their towels) were better at influencing conservation behavior than traditional “save our planet” appeals. Normative appeals are more effective when the collective level of self (“we”) is activated rather than the individual level of self (“I”) (White and Simpson 2013), which is consistent with the notion that social norms operate within the public dimension of moral identity.

Previous research has documented the power of social norms to influence actual consumption behavior. A noteworthy example involves the energy company OPOWER, which sent reports to almost 600,000 households across the United States comparing customers’ electricity use to that of their neighbors. To prevent customers who already used less energy than average from increasing their consumption – a “boomerang effect” – the company also used injunctive norms, including smiley faces in the reports sent to low-energy-use customers to convey that conserving energy is a prosocial behavior. Households who received the comparative reports reduced their energy consumption by 2% across the United States relative to control households who did not receive them, and households who had the highest levels of energy consumption before receiving the reports reduced consumption by more than 6% (Allcott 2011).

One potential implication of social norms to brands is that brands might exert normative influence and guide consumption behavior, possibly promoting the social good through its own actions. For instance, when the outdoor gear and clothing retailer REI decides to close its stores on BlackFriday and launches the #OptOutside campaign, it is quite possible that REI’s behavior is setting the mark as far as what should be done and what is expected from its customers. Recent

research has investigated the role of brands as a social other and, in the context of charitable giving, has found opposing effects of corporate brand influences. Specifically, consumers were less likely to donate to nonprofits with corporate sponsors because they perceived their individual donations to matter less when the nonprofit was already sponsored by a corporation (Bennett, Kim, and Loken 2013). However, in other contexts where the relative (financial) power of corporations is not so salient, such as encouraging healthy living, active lifestyles, or actions that benefit others, the role of brands as a social other may exert a positive influence on prosocial behaviors.

### **Other dimensions of self- and social identity**

Self-signaling, self-verification, and impression management can also motivate consumers to engage in prosocial behaviors outside the moral domain, when other aspects of their self- and social identity are salient. For instance, consumers are more likely to recycle instead of trashing products that are linked to their self-identity because consumers avoid dissociating themselves from a part of the self (Trudel, Argo, and Meng 2016). Consumers are also more likely to act prosocially when the identity of a group they are associated with is threatened. Specifically, when a social group from which consumers want to dissociate themselves (i.e., an out-group) publicly displays prosocial behaviors, consumers tend to perceive a threat to their own group's identity and engage in prosocial behavior themselves to affirm the image of their own group (White, Simpson, and Argo 2014). On the other hand, consumers may avoid prosocial behaviors that directly threaten their group identity. For instance, because environmentally-friendly products tend to be stereotyped as feminine, men avoid consuming these products, both publicly and in private, to preserve their masculine image (Brough et al. 2016). Overall, marketers need to pay close attention to the different mechanisms through which prosocial behaviors influence how consumers perceive themselves and are perceived by others, both in terms of their morality and other aspects of their self- and social identity.

Brands also need to be careful about the impact of their own prosocial behaviors on consumer perceptions of them outside the moral domain, especially regarding product performance inferences. The type of prosocial engagement matters. If the prosocial behavior is not directly related to the product, such as when the company donates to a cause, this action generates social goodwill that leads consumers to evaluate the brand more positively (a "halo effect"), which in turn enhances perceived product performance (Chernev and Blair 2015). That is not the case when the prosocial behavior directly implicates the product. In particular,

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consumers may infer that sustainable products perform more poorly than non-sustainable products, for two related reasons. First, consumers tend to associate ethical brands with gentleness and warmth, while non-ethical brands are associated with strength and competence (Aaker, Vohs, and Mogilner 2010; Lin and Chang 2012), which makes brands particularly vulnerable when strength is a core benefit sought by consumers (Luchs et al. 2010). Second, consumers tend to pay attention to how companies allocate their resources, assuming that intentional investments in product sustainability happen at the expense of investments in product quality (Newman, Gorlin, and Dhar 2014). For this reason, consumers may infer that the brand is inflating prices to compensate for prosocial engagement (Habel et al. 2016). These negative inferences may even work against the environment, as consumers tend to increase the amount of a sustainable product they use to compensate for the perceived inferiority in performance (Lin and Chang 2012). Companies should be particularly careful about the communication of sustainable products, because offering credible signals of product performance (Lin and Chang 2012) or framing the environmental benefit as an unintended side effect (Newman, Gorlin, and Dhar 2014) may prevent consumers from making these negative inferences.

## **MORE ALTRUISTIC DRIVERS OF PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

### **Empathy**

Empathy is *par excellence* the altruistic driver for prosocial behavior, because it is an emotional response that generates, as an ultimate goal, the motivation to help the other person for whom empathy is felt (Batson and Powell 2003). However, empathy is still not “pure” altruism to the extent that the ultimate result, even if it is not sought out, is the positive emotion (“warm glow”), or the reduction in negative emotions, experienced by the person behaving prosocially rather than the beneficiary of this behavior (Andreoni 1990; Loewenstein and Small 2007; Sun and Trudel 2017).

Brands and corporations that genuinely care about stimulating prosocial behaviors should consider the role of psychological distance in facilitating or hindering empathy. We feel more empathy toward people that suffer from the same misfortune as our friends and close others (Small and Simonsohn 2008). We are also more likely to help needy people that belong to the same social group as we do (in-groups), especially in cultures where group membership is fundamental to our

own sense of self (Duclos and Barasch 2014). The finding that we empathize more with individualized victims is particularly true when this individual is psychologically close to us (Kogut and Ritov 2007). Across these studies, we find that consumers tend to empathize with people that are close to them. However, nonprofit brands are a more abstract donation target than individual victims, which makes them less prone for empathy. Research has shown that empathy operates only toward individual victims, not nonprofits (Ein-Gar and Levontin 2013). Going beyond individual victims and nonprofit brands, future research may explore whether brands that associate themselves with a prosocial cause may prevent consumers from feeling empathy toward other people, with potential downstream effects on actual prosocial behaviors.

Because we are less likely to feel empathy toward distant others, research has also investigated factors that increase prosocial behavior by reducing psychological distance. For instance, even though a range of positive emotions (pride, hope, compassion, and love) stimulate prosocial behavior toward people that are close to us, love seems to be the only emotion that brings distant others closer to us, hence facilitating prosocial behavior toward them (Cavanaugh, Bettman, and Luce 2015). Moral identity produces a similar effect of bringing distant others closer to ourselves (Reed and Aquino 2003; Winterich, Mittal, and Ross 2009), which influences not only our prosocial behaviors but also our attitudes toward otherwise distant brands. As the activation of moral identity leads us to perceive ourselves to be closer to outgroups, which comprise people we typically do not want to associate ourselves with, it also makes us like brands linked with an outgroup more (Choi and Winterich 2013).

Regardless of whether the “warm-glow” (Andreoni 1990) feeling of helping others is the ultimate goal that motivates individuals or a mere by-product of having reached an altruistic goal (Batson et al. 1991), brands can benefit from this positive feeling because it increases consumer satisfaction and purchase from brands associated with a prosocial cause (Andrews et al. 2014; Giebelhausen et al. 2016). However, marketers should be cautious about how they frame incentives offered for consumers to engage in prosocial behaviors. Both steep price discounts and monetary incentives for participation prevent consumers from feeling good about their prosocial behaviors, because they shift the meaning of the act from benefiting others to benefiting the self (Andrews et al. 2014; Giebelhausen et al. 2016).

### **Promotion of justice**

Promoting justice is an altruistic motivation when consumers pursue the protection of this moral principle as their ultimate goal (Batson and Powell 2003),



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even though the altruistic nature of this motivation is much more questionable than that of empathy. Our tendencies to justify our own deviations from moral standards (Bandura et al. 1996) and to appear moral without incurring the costs of acting morally (Batson et al. 1997) put into question the degree to which pursuing this moral principle is the ultimate goal of individuals. Another important difference between empathy and promoting justice is that the former seems to be a reliable motivator of prosocial behaviors, whereas the latter may in some cases have the opposite effect of inhibiting prosocial behaviors, such as when benefactors are responsible for their problems (Lee, Winterich, and Ross 2014). In any case, the promotion of justice is a core theme for consumers and brands involved in social causes.

The motivation to promote justice is stronger when people believe they can actually make a difference through their prosocial consumption behaviors. When countries or individuals believe that inequality is something to be expected and accepted, individuals are less like to donate their time or money because they perceive themselves to be less responsible for helping others in need (Winterich and Zhang 2014). Similarly, being confronted with a high level of injustice without a clear path to justice restoration through consumption makes people less likely to purchase fair-trade products (White, MacDonnell, and Ellard 2012) and decreases willingness to pay (Trudel and Cotte 2009). Marketers can encourage a sense of personal role in promoting justice by giving consumers more say in how the brand supports prosocial behaviors. In the context of cause-related marketing, allowing consumers to choose the cause that receives donations from the company increases consumers' perceived role in helping the cause, which in turn results in higher willingness to purchase products from the brand (Robinson, Irmak, and Jayachandran 2012).

Prosocial brands may also play a more direct role in increasing consumers' perceived ability to exert social change. Research has shown that using a product from a brand associated with better performance on a task can make some consumers more confident in their own abilities and hence perform better in a related challenging task (Park and John 2014). For instance, some consumers who used an MIT pen while answering GRE questions performed better than consumers using a regular brand (Park and John 2014). Extending this finding to the prosocial domain, it is possible that prosocial brands also make consumers more confident in their own ability to make a difference in society.

## **ARE BRANDS MORE EGOISTIC OR MORE ALTRUISTIC?**

The degree to which prosocial actions are motivated by altruism or egoistic drivers is not only a theoretical or philosophical question, but also one that consumers keep in mind when they relate to prosocial brands. Even though consumers may engage in prosocial behaviors for egoistic motivations, such as impression management, they respond negatively to brands that they perceive to be guided by similar motivations. Consumers accept that companies need to profit, and indeed tend to respond most positively to brands that pursue strategic concerns, such as attracting new customers, while also attending to moral values (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). However, consumers respond negatively to brands that engage in prosocial behaviors for more egoistic reasons, such as tax write-offs, or to manage the impressions that stakeholders, such as employees or stockholders, have of them (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006). A key to facilitating positive motive inferences is for the brand to invest consistently in the cause. For example, companies that invest consistently in green new products gain legitimacy in this domain, which amplifies the positive effect of subsequent green product introductions on attitudes toward the brand (Olsen, Slotegraaf, and Chandukala 2014). Positive inferences about a brand's motive can even motivate consumers to engage in prosocial behavior themselves. When brands signal commitment by engaging in costly environmental efforts that are visible to consumers, the company can save money and help the environment through consumers' own effort to conserve resources (Wang, Krishna, and McFerran 2017).

Attributes of the brand also play a critical role in shaping consumers' evaluation of brands that associate themselves with prosocial initiatives. Most important is the degree of fit between the image of the brand and the prosocial behavior that the brand aims to associate itself with. Engaging in prosocial initiatives that are not congruent with the image of the brand may blur the brand's positioning and lead to negative evaluations from consumers (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006). Brands benefit more from supporting causes that "fit well" with the brand in terms of: 1) specific associations, such as when a pet-food brand like Alpo sponsors the Humane Society which rescues animals (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006); 2) perceptual attributes such as color, e.g., Snapple Pink Lemonade and a breast cancer foundation (Kuo and Rice 2015); or 3) the goals that consumers associate with a brand, such as self-enhancement or conservation (Torelli, Monga, and Kaikati 2012).

The effect of brand-cause fit extends beyond simple brand evaluations to other aspects of the relationship between consumers and brands. For instance, consumers are willing to pay more (less) for a brand that donates small amounts of money to a cause that does (does not) fit with the brand (Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, and Hoyer 2012). Importantly, this finding was explained by the motives inferred by

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consumers: when a company donates a small amount to a cause that doesn't really fit the brand, consumers infer less altruistic motives and therefore are willing to pay less from a product from this brand (Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, and Hoyer 2012). This stream of research shows that involving a brand with unrelated causes may actually hurt instead of helping the brand.

## CONCLUSION

Prosocial brands allow companies to morally engage with consumers. Prosocial brands are now moving beyond claims of sustainability, green supply chains, CSR audits and into making strong stands on important social and political issues. For instance, several high-profile brands including Apple and Starbucks have come out recently to support same-sex marriage and immigration. In a highly-contested political environment, Patagonia directly attacked the federal government, which had reduced the size of the land dedicated to two national monuments. Consumers who entered Patagonia's website had an unexpected touch point with the brand: they were invited to take action against the government with the provocative statement "The President Stole Your Land." Consumers who took the time to read the whole statement from the brand had the chance to learn that Patagonia was in a decades-long crusade to preserve public lands and that this cause "fits" with the brand because of its association with outdoor recreation.

The current review has characterized branding from a consumer decision making and prosocial perspective to hopefully provide a new perspective on branding and stimulate more research in this area. Few would disagree that consumers benefit from more prosocial brands. Given the impact that prosocial brands can have on society and in contributing to the social welfare of our societies, understanding the consumer behavior behind those that support and purchase these brands is an important endeavor.

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