

What moral identity and competing selves can add to moral foundations theory: Comment on Ramos, Johnson, VanEpps & Graham (2024)

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Abstract

In a provocative and insightful analysis, Ramos et al. (*Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2024) propose the introduction of *Moral Foundations Theory* (hereafter MFT)—as a useful framework to (1) explain moral consumer decision-making more granularly and (2) set forth unique, testable future hypotheses in the field of marketing and consumer psychology. I discuss and build on their analysis to expand (1) but also narrow (2). I couch their conceptualization in the context of a multiple-identity framework (*Consumer Psychology Review*, 2021, **4**, 100) and move slightly away from their useful but perhaps more taxonomic approach. I try to buttress their work by situating MFT in the context of how the process of moral identity (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2002, **83**, 1423) competes with other identities (cf. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 2020, **57**, 375; *Current Opinion in Psychology* 2016, **10**, 94) to help determine when and how the building blocks of moral foundations may become critical drivers of consumption in the areas of persuasion, emotions, and prosocial charitable consumer behavior.

KEYWORDS

charitable giving and prosocial behavior, emotions and affect, identity, moral identity, morality, persuasion, self and identity

INTRODUCTION

Ramos et al. (2024) formally introduce *Moral Foundations Theory* (hereafter MFT) into the literature in consumer psychology and marketing. According to Ramos and colleagues, MFT has a rich history in moral psychology literature. MFT emerged from early work rooted in the sophistication of one's cognitive reasoning (Kohlberg et al., 1983) to later granular conceptions of proposed moral building blocks. People may rely on these building blocks to drive moral decisions (Ramos et al., 2024). MFT incorporates the classic nature vs. nurture debate by arguing that morality is first shaped by the evolutionary pressures that favor the survival and procreation of the species. Over time, that “draft” of morality is then

shaped within the specific culture in that the person is socialized. This leads to intuitive moral judgments that have specific components: (1) Care/harm (2) Equality/inequality (3) Proportionality/disproportionality (4) Loyalty/betrayal (5) Authority/subversion (6) Purity/degradation (see their table 1 for a taxonomic breakdown).

These moral foundations of MFT are pillars that can be the guiding posts in moral decision-making. It is important to note that Ramos and colleagues point out that the heterogeneity in how these foundations may be applied is agnostic in its normative prediction of whether a consumer “should or should not” engage in right versus wrong behavior (see Ramos et al., 2024). Rather, these are the rationalization aspects and internal narratives that will likely impact or follow from

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consumer decisions that have some kind of moral facet. Indeed, Ramos and colleagues argue that “to be a consumer is to be concerned with morality, whether we actively realize or not, because our consumption decisions are directly influenced by our moral values and have meaningful moral consequences for the world” (Ramos et al., 2024). This point is well argued by several nonobvious anecdotal examples of *degrees of morality* that may be at play in many different mundane everyday consumer behavior (e.g., breakfast decisions regarding coffee, eggs, toast, etc.).

In introducing MFT to the consumer psychology and marketing literature, the goal of Ramos and colleagues is to (1) better explain and understand specific nuances of moral consumer decision-making and (2) set forth unique, testable future hypotheses in our field. The goal of this commentary is to expand (1) but also narrow (2). To do this I try to broaden their analysis in the context of a multiple-identity framework (Forehand et al., 2021) and move toward situating MFT in terms of how the process of *moral identity* (Aquino & Reed, 2002) competes with other identities within the self-system (cf. Shang et al., 2020) to help determine when and how the six building blocks of moral foundations become antecedents and consequences of consumption. In that sense, this additional nuance may determine exactly what degree of morality will be extracted from any consumer decision-making scenario (mundane or otherwise), by a particular consumer and under what conditions.

The multi-dimensionality of identity

In recent reviews (Forehand et al., 2021; Saint Clair et al., 2024) my colleagues and I have urged identity theorists to incorporate a *multi-dimensional* view in moving the literature forward. The key premise is that the self is made up of multiple identities that are individually regulated by specific, well-established principles (Reed et al., 2012). Moreover, how these different identities are regulated *together* can be summarized in processes that describe how multiple identities within the self-system become, elevated, suppressed, or expelled (Reed et al., 2016). There are two important points to make here. First, a key question becomes *what* identities a person holds and *how many* identities a person can hold at any given point in time.¹ The second question (which is related to the first), is *what causes an identity to be elevated versus suppressed over another identity in terms of its relevance to guiding a specific consumer decision?* Identities that are more frequently activated and drive a consumers' decision-making will create bidirectional reinforcement between the strength of that identity and the behavior. Finally, what are the

¹The literature on “self-complexity” (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002) suggests that fewer identities mean that any one specific identity *can* take on more prominence in the self-system. This “centrality” (Meca et al., 2015) determines the strength of any specific identity in the context of other potential identities within the self-system.

factors that will cause a consumer to let go of a specific identity within their self-system (Reed et al., 2016). Clearly, one of the potential identities within the self-system is *moral identity* (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and it is this identity that perhaps holds important significance for MFT.

Moral identity as a mechanism of moral foundations

Now, let's revisit the question of which specific consumption scenarios are perceived through a moral lens and to what extent. This exploration leads us to consider the influence of the consumer's moral identity, a concept that may play a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions. Moral identity, as defined, encompasses the extent to which an individual internalizes morality as an integral part of their identity and the degree to which they feel compelled to express it symbolically to the external world. This perspective, introduced by Aquino and Reed (2002), offers a valuable complement to the more conventional models of moral decision-making that relied heavily on cognitive sophistication (Kohlberg et al., 1983). Aquino and Reed's conceptualization, along with their subsequent scale, utilized morally charged trait stimuli to activate a mental representation of a moral persona. Following this activation, participants are assessed on the self-importance of their moral identity through specific inquiries about the internalization and symbolization of the salient mental image.²

In this commentary, I posit that the strength of an individual's moral identity, as quantified by Aquino and Reed's scale, might serve as a driving force in determining the extent to which consumers perceive the world through the lens of the six moral foundations. I propose that individuals with a robust moral identity, as an initial step in this process, are more inclined to consciously and subconsciously delve into the moral dimensions of everyday consumption decisions. This inclination arises because the depth of moral considerations within a consumption choice correlates directly with the consumer's sensitivity to their own moral identity and their consideration of external individuals who fall within their sphere of moral concern (Reed & Aquino, 2003, Study 1). For instance, a consumer's evaluation of aspects like care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation inherently involves an assessment of how their consumption behaviors impact others. Those with a strong moral identity tend to encompass a broader circle of moral concern (Reed

²This analysis presumes that the importance of consumers' moral identity's importance varies within their overall self-definition (Pohling et al., 2018). Consistency is the motivation that stabilizes this self-definition and it comes from fundamental desires for self-consistency (Shao et al., 2008). There is ample evidence that higher levels of moral identity correspond with more frequent and spontaneous moral behavior (Boegershausen et al., 2015; Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Hertz & Krettenauer, 2016). It is important to note however, that low scores on the scale are not necessarily a proxy of immorality; rather they are signals that morality is not integrated within the self; which does not preclude moral behavior occurring for reasons other than identity-based concerns.

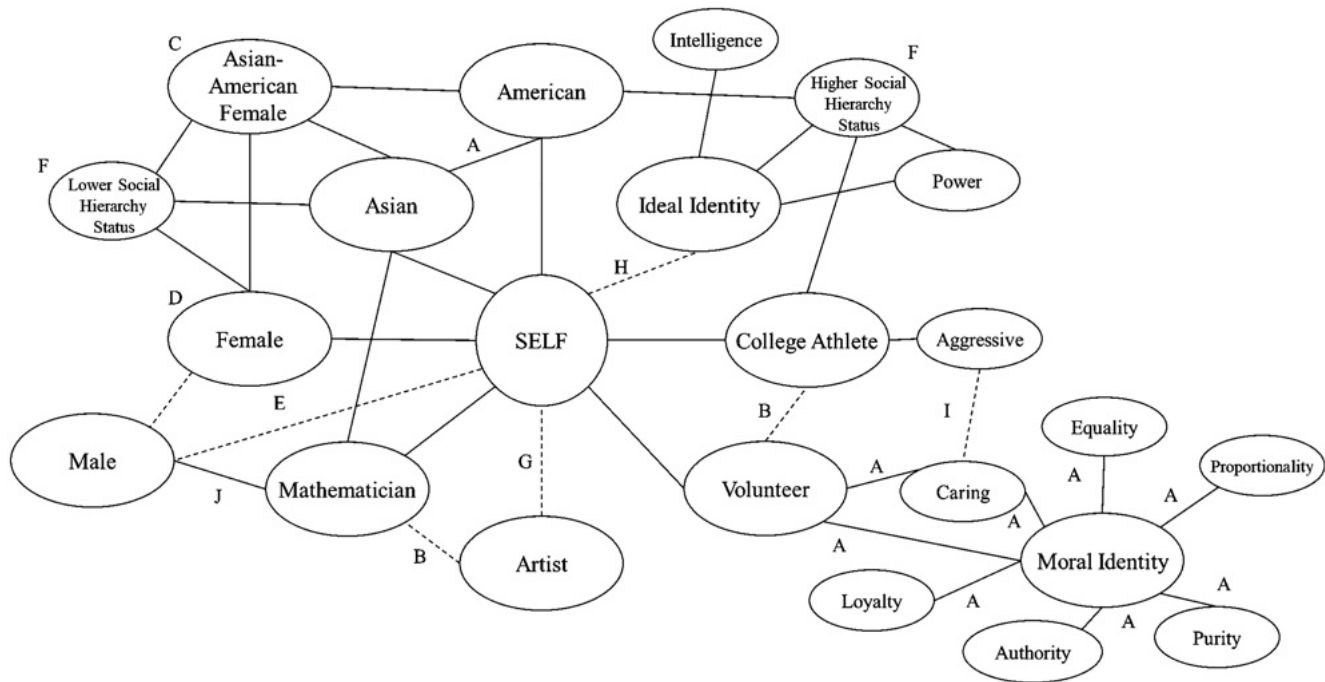


FIGURE 1 An example consumer's multiple-identity network (adapted from Forehand et al., 2021). Solid (dashed) lines represent associative (dissociative) relationships. A, identity association; B, identity dissociation; C, intersectional subgroup identity; D, superordinate group identity; E, outgroup association; F, social hierarchy associations; G, group exclusion threat or social identity threat; H, classic self-discrepancy; I, identity conflict; J, stigma.

& Aquino, 2003), including individuals beyond their immediate in group, when assessing who ultimately should be impacted by morally guided positive actions. Indeed, there is evidence that moral identity is a trigger for how justice and fairness are allocated (Lee et al., 2014).

Moral identity versus other identities: The impact of conflict minimization on MFT

Up to this point, I have suggested that moral identity could serve as at least one driving force determining the extent to which a consumption decision is viewed through a moral lens. Another valuable addition to the analysis by Ramos and colleagues introduces the concept of how moral identity may interact with other identities, potentially enhancing or diminishing the application of the six pillars of MFT to consumer decisions. This idea hinges on the notion of individuals holding multiple identities. To illustrate, consider a hypothetical consumer's self-concept, as represented in Figure 1 (referred to as a Multiple Identity Network). Within this identity network, theorists posit that there is a strong drive to maintain a stable equilibrium (Forehand et al., 2021). The degree of conflict between any two identities plays a crucial role in this homeostasis. The underlying premise is that the motivation for a robust moral identity to influence the application of specific MFT foundations is context-dependent. That means the "identity relevance" (Reed et al., 2012; Reed & Forehand, 2016) of a particular consumer decision is key and depends on *the presence*

of conflicting identities that may otherwise temper the application of MFT (Saint Clair et al., 2024). Recent research (Saint Clair et al., forthcoming) has argued that the urgency to allocate cognitive resources to address inter-identity conflicts depends on at least two key factors: the salience of the two identities in a given situation (see Reed et al., 2012) and their compatibility (see Saint Clair & Forehand, 2020). Importantly, these factors can either enhance or suppress (Reed & Forehand, 2016) the application of MFT.

For instance, consider how the centrality of moral identity (as a superordinate identity construct that connects moral foundations) may operate in conjunction with other identities depicted in Figure 1. Note that in this example, the identity "Volunteer" is also associative (A) with caring as an MFT trait component and moral identity as an organizing gestalt. In this case, the two identities elevate each other, and there is likely to be less conflict in situations where the volunteer identity is both salient and relevant (Reed et al., 2012) to a given consumption decision.³ Conversely,

³Let's imagine two different consumers who have the self-conceptual structure depicted in Figure 1, but for one consumer their "volunteer" behavioral reinforcement may be activated by volunteer work to provide aid and support at local homeless shelters and soup kitchens. For another consumer, their behavioral reinforcement may be predominantly activated with volunteer work in animal shelters. For both consumers, the presence of these two "associative" identities (Forehand et al., 2021) present little to no conflict with moral identity and moral foundations. Yet, the two identities may drive different "moralization" of the same consumer decision with perhaps the first consumer realizing more salient moral aspects of caring and equality in the case of grocery store worker wage fairness, and the latter more likely to be acutely sensitive to the moral components of eggs from free range hens.

what about the situation where the two identities are *dissociative*? Note that in this example, the identity “College Athlete” is linked to the trait “aggressive” which may create conflict with key MFT foundations activated by a strong moral identity. Hence, this multi-dimensional view would produce the prediction that the extent to which the College Athlete identity is made salient by a consumption situation may lessen the impact of moralization considerations of MFT foundations on the decision itself (e.g., choosing the bananas to put into your protein smoothie before a training session may get less fair trade/labor scrutiny). Therefore, the key premise for evaluating the MFT implications of consumption decisions is to understand (1) the strength of moral identity as connected to the application of moral foundations and (2) the presence of other identities that could cause a relatively stronger or weaker imputation of morality within that consumption decision at that point in time.

Implications for persuasion & consumer behavior

Ramos et al. (2024) present a thoughtful analysis on how MFT connects with market persuasion, shedding light on how consumers respond to myriad messages and appeals. The reimagined premise based on the discussion thus far is to rethink the implications of personalized messaging. MFT is promising in the domain where persuasion is heightened when marketers tailor messages to harmonize with an individual's deeply entrenched moral values (Reed et al., 2007). The impact of such customization can be profound and can forge an identity-based connection between the message and the recipient's moral compass. Returning to some of the scenarios introduced by Ramos and colleagues, let's examine how persuasive messaging takes on a different conception here. For example, a working parent finds themselves in a delicate balancing act, striving to excel both as a dedicated parent and a successful professional (Rothbard et al., 2005). This challenge presents a striking conflict of interests: the workplace often demands traits like assertiveness, dominance, and decisiveness, while parenthood requires qualities such as nurturing, kindness, and flexibility (Shang et al., 2020). The six pillars of MFT may bridge this gap through moral identity, but nonetheless, a consumer is likely to experience a non-trivial self-regulatory dilemma here—and important light may be shed by taking a multi-dimensional view in the context of moral identity. For example, consider a sustainability campaign meticulously tailoring its message to emphasize environmental responsibility when targeting an eco-conscious target market. An expanded view like the one taken here suggests that an identity rooted in the social category label “environmentalist” is likely to elevate moral identity and its prominence—connecting with the logic of an expanding circle of moral regard as

mentioned earlier. Hence, there is the opportunity to get twice the identity relevance bang for the buck in terms of reinforcement within the self-system. The prediction would be that such elevation renders the message not only relatable but also deeply convincing to recipients who ardently value eco-friendliness.

Moral appeals can indeed serve as potent persuasive instruments, particularly when they align seamlessly with the six pillars of MFT. But suppression is also possible. Returning to the parent identity example, a working parent may need to make choices about the food they provide for their child, considering both the child's preferences and the environmental impact of their choices. In this scenario, they may compartmentalize by selecting convenient, child-friendly food options to meet their parenting role, even if these choices conflict with their desire to make environmentally conscious decisions. Compartmentalization may afford them the ability to manage the conflicting demands of their identities as a working parent and an environmentally conscious consumer (Reed & Forehand, 2016). As another example, consider a consumer with a formidable moral identity poised to morally rationalize the foundations of MFT. This consumer may ardently prioritize products and services aligned with ethical values, such as opting for fair trade and eco-friendly choices. However, a clash may arise when their political identity—shaped by affiliations that downplay environmental concerns—produces a potential lessening of moralization intensity for this decision. This tension between moral and political identity and the effects of persuasive messaging will depend on how the message creator understands and can help the consumer mitigate such conflict. For example, Finnel et al. (2011) showed that moral disengagement drove U.S. residents to be more supportive of persuasive appeals that supported war in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and that this tendency was amplified by a strong American identity but mitigated by a strong moral identity (Aquino et al., 2007). The current view would suggest that messaging around creating support for a moral issue will hinge on the premises introduced here, and how the aspects of moral identity and conflicting identities may suppress the potency of moral foundations in MFT or change how they are moralized.

Implications for emotions and consumer behavior

The analysis by Ramos & colleagues begins to nicely unpack important insights in the area of emotion research. Clearly, the field can benefit from exploration into the role of morality in shaping human emotions, shedding light on how moral identity can trigger the spectrum of moral foundations, including caring, equality, loyalty, proportionality, authority, and purity. Our analysis argues that the specific moral foundations are integral components of an individual's

salient moral identity, influencing their emotional responses and moral rationalization processes. Past research has demonstrated a direct relationship between the strength of moral identity and sensitivity to moral emotions. For example, (Aquino et al., 2011) studied how individuals with a strong moral identity react when they witness exceptional acts of goodness. Their studies suggest that consumers who highly value morality as part of their identity tend to experience profound feelings of moral elevation. This heightened sense of moral elevation can be triggered simply by witnessing uncommon acts of kindness and humanity. This emotional response inspires them to view humankind more positively and to strive for self-improvement (Aquino et al., 2011). The work suggests that this moral emotional acuity may elevate the application of foundations of MFT in very specific ways, conditional on the presence of salient, potential, conflicting self-conceptual components.

Ramos and colleagues point out that specific emotions may drive moral issues. What is important here is the premise that the connection between specific emotions and moral outcomes may be directly related to how those emotions tend to reinforce associative and dissociative identities in the self-system. The research on moral emotions shows that feelings like disgust, anger, and fear can make people more sensitive to certain moral issues. For example, disgust is linked to ideas about purity and can affect how people judge things like physical and spiritual cleanliness (Ramos et al., 2024). It is also associated with politically conservative attitudes on topics like immigration and same-sex marriage. Here, without using the exact term, Ramos and colleagues point out the possibility of identity conflict—suggesting that how these different identities connect to emotional outputs will matter as to what moral foundations trigger specific moral emotions in specific situations. The idea that Ramos and colleagues point out, that emotions don't always neatly line up with specific moral concerns—suggests additional variation and or moderators at play.⁴ The lens suggested here may play an important explanatory role.

For example, research has explored how feelings of gratitude and moral elevation, which come from witnessing good deeds, affect a person's moral identity over time. Pohling et al. (2018) found that moral elevation predicted an increase in moral identity, but surprisingly, gratitude was influenced by moral identity, not the other way around. Exploratory analyses showed that some effects varied by age group, pointing to important generational defined alternative identity moderators that may elevate or suppress emotional outputs as described in the study.

⁴Identities including those imposed by culture (Nelson et al., 2006), can also clash with moral values in consumer decisions. For example, a person from a culture that values frugality and saving may find it challenging to justify purchasing luxury items, even if they are aligned with their personal moral values. This conflict can lead to guilt or discomfort when making such purchases.

Moral identity and positive emotions are connected. Our argument here is that the strength of moral identity and the presence of elevating and conflicting identities are two such key moderators to explore further—to identify associative and dissociative connections of emotional inputs to alternative identities that may become situationally salient in the application of MFT to consumer decision-making.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROSOCIAL AND CHARITABLE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Research has consistently shown that morality plays a significant role in influencing prosocial behavior and charitable giving in consumption (Ramos et al., 2024). Consumers often make decisions about purchasing products or engaging in charitable acts based on their moral values and ethical considerations. MFT plays a key role here, as the analysis in Ramos et al. carefully describes. In addition, moral identity, which in our view here represents the degree to which a consumer fuses morality as part of their identity can mediate the diagnosticity of the six pillars of MFT to drive consumption outcomes. Put another way, when moral identity is strong, there is more motivation to view the world through a lens of (1) Care/harm (2) Equality/inequality (3) Proportionality/disproportionality (4) Loyalty/betrayal (5) Authority/subversion (6) Purity/degradation. For example, consider the moral foundation, proportionality. Ramos and colleagues note that this foundation “espouses the idea that in social relations, rewards and punishments for parties are proportional to their effort, costs, guilt, contribution, or merit” Ramos et al. (2024) Lee et al. (2014) found that the strength of moral identity was positively related to donors giving less to consumers in need who were perceived as being highly responsible for their own plight, and that perceived justice was the mediator. However, as we have argued, this should be moderated by existing identity conflict. Lee et al. (2014) further showed that this effect is lessened when high moral identified donors are made more aware of *their own immorality*.

Hence in the domain of prosocial and charitable consumer behavior, our premise appears viable. Consider a person who identifies strongly with traditional gender roles may feel conflicted when choosing to purchase products that challenge those roles, such as gender-neutral clothing or gender-inclusive toys. This conflict may lead to hesitation or avoidance of such products. Individuals who strongly identify as environmentalists may face moral conflicts when considering consumer choices. They may want to reduce their carbon footprint and support eco-friendly products, but if these choices clash with their budget constraints or convenience, they may struggle to align their moral and practical values. This conflict can result in decisions that prioritize cost or convenience over environmental

concerns. For instance, prior research explored the impact of identity congruency on donation behavior. The findings reveal that when consumers are informed that a previous donor who shares their identity made a large contribution, consumers are more likely to donate. This effect is amplified when consumers have high collective identity esteem and when attention is focused on others. This interaction effect was consistently observed across multiple experiments, highlighting the importance of both collective identity and social context in driving donation behavior (Shang et al., 2008). Additionally, a field experiment showed that women, when primed with moral traits, tend to donate about 20% more than men. This gender difference in donation behavior was empirically attributed to differences in how market behavior influences moral identity discrepancy, with women showing a greater tendency to align their behavior with their moral identity (Shang et al., 2020).

Other research has explored the associative and dissociative effects of moral identity and professional identity. Reed et al. (2007) found that individuals with a strong moral identity perceive giving time as more moral and self-expressive, even when the opportunity costs are equivalent. This preference for giving time is particularly pronounced when the moral self is primed and the time given serves a moral purpose. Interestingly, consumers with higher organizational status—presumably a stronger professional identity typically prefer giving money over time, but this preference is weakened among those with a highly self-important moral identity. Hence, to build on the work by Ramos and colleagues, it may make sense to understand what specific foundations imbue what decisions as a function of other elements in the self-system (gender, age, or organizational-related identities) that can elevate and or suppress the effect of MFT as consequential drivers of consumer behavior.

CONCLUSION

In summary, Ramos et al.'s (2024) analysis introduces MFT as a remarkably valuable framework for understanding moral consumer decision-making and generating testable hypotheses in marketing and consumer psychology. This discussion elaborated on their insights and refined the scope of future research by integrating MFT into a multiple-identity framework and emphasizing the interplay between moral identity processes and other identities. The key premise discussed is that the severity of moral rationalization within any low- or high-involvement consumption decision can be a function of the strength of moral identity and the presence or absence of other identities whose (dis)association may (conflict) elevate the application of MFT on driving a consumer decision. Hopefully, this additional nuance can add value to understanding how

MFT may impact consumer psychology including persuasion, emotional responses, and prosocial charitable consumer actions.

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