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## When people mention charities on Facebook, does this predict offline good intentions? Or, are they simply virtue signalling?

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*Journal of Business Ethics is one of the most prestigious Business & Management journals, and is ranked in the Financial Times Top 50 list.*

### Summary:

In this study we argued that mentioning a charity on Facebook is merely conspicuous consumption, as the individual is virtue signalling to others online without any requirement to donate in the 'real' world. We called this behaviour 'conspicuous virtue signalling' (CVS). CVS is self-oriented (for intrinsic benefits), or other oriented (to impress others). We examined how CVS is influenced by personal traits, specifically Need for Uniqueness (NFU) and Attention to Social Comparison Information (ATSCI). Furthermore, we explored outcomes of CVS, specifically self-esteem, prosocial behaviour (intention to donate to the charity), and unethical signalling behaviour (buying counterfeit goods). Data from two samples, 234 students based in Ireland and 296 U.S. adult consumers, was analysed. All of our participants had an active Facebook account and all had mentioned a charity on Facebook in the past year. Findings showed that people who wish to distinguish themselves from others on Facebook, or those who are influenced by others' cues for social appropriateness, were more likely to mention charities on Facebook. Participants' self-esteem and their offline donation intention was predicted by the extent to which their CVS was self-oriented. However, participants whose CVS was other-oriented were less likely to donate money to charity. Furthermore, those individuals were more likely to buy counterfeit goods, as another form of conspicuous consumption.

### Introduction and theoretical model:

One way to achieve an enhanced self-identity is through conspicuous consumption. Offline, individuals purchase and display high status items as a form of conspicuous consumption. On social media, mentioning a product may offer the same opportunities for 'virtual' conspicuous consumption, where 'ownership' is without any requirement of consumption in the real world. Extant literature had suggested that displays of offline charity are a form of conspicuous consumption, called Conspicuous Donation Behaviour (CDB). For example, wearing charity ribbons can generate public recognition, through virtue signalling. However, with CDB, signalling usually follows real donations. Our conceptualisation (CVS) advanced CDB by considering charitable mentions that intentionally signal the poster's virtue, and that are deliberately posted on a social medium so that the display of CVS is widely visible. Yet the behaviour is virtual and no donation is required. However, these people also achieve an enhanced self-concept through public recognition for 'being good'.

Theory suggests that NFU and ATSCI are antecedents of conspicuous consumption. An individual with high NFU pursues products to establish identity and to distinguish oneself from others. An individual with high ATSCI is sensitive to social cues and adapts their actions due to concerns about socially appropriate behaviour. NFU and ATSCI were hypothesised as predictors of CVS in our model. Considering outcomes, we first investigated whether CVS raised self-esteem, because posting about charities online may enhance presentation of the self. Second, we explored whether people who engage in CVS on Facebook have intention to donate offline. Third, considering CVS as a form of conspicuous consumption, we queried whether people engaging in CVS on Facebook would also engage in other forms of conspicuous consumption that are unethical. Would they knowingly buy a counterfeit luxury good?

#### Methodology:

We conducted two studies. Study 1 analysed data from 234 students based in Ireland. Study 2 used data from a sample of 296 adults based in the United States. Both studies investigated CVS on Facebook. Facebook is a highly visible medium, and posts may not reflect individuals' material realities. Therefore, Facebook was a suitable medium to investigate whether online virtue signalling informed offline behaviours. In Study 1, 71% of the respondents were female, with an average age of 22.98 years. They spent 2.72 hours each day on Facebook, with 570.47 Facebook friends, on average. In Study 2, 57.8% of the respondents were female, with an average age of 37.14 years. 66.2% were working full-time. They spent 1.93 hours each day on Facebook, with 346.14 Facebook friends, on average. We measured each construct using existing scales. For both studies, the counterfeit luxury good in the survey was a luxury watch, because watches have high symbolic properties, and they are stereotypical luxury items for all ages and genders. Data was analysed using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), using EQS 6.2.

#### Findings and Discussion:

In our study, NFU predicted CVS, suggesting that people mention charities on Facebook to distinguish themselves from others. ATSCI also predicts CVS, indicating that people mention a charity on Facebook because doing so is perceived to be more socially acceptable than mentioning other brands. Furthermore, only those who mentioned a charity with personal meaning enhanced their self-esteem. Also, when the charity had personal meaning, individuals were more likely to intend to donate offline. By contrast, if the primary purpose of CVS was to impress others, individuals were less likely to intend to donate offline. Higher other-oriented CVS also predicted purchase intention of counterfeit goods, for both samples. We argued that, for these individuals, both behaviours (mentioning a charity online and buying a counterfeit good) are simply forms of conspicuous consumption.

In summary, the current study provides insights into the traits informing CVS on Facebook. It also offers new findings about the relationships between CVS, self-esteem, and intentions to behave in both prosocial and unethical ways.

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