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White eyes are the window to the pure soul: Metaphorical association and overgeneralization effects for spokespeople with limbal rings

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ABSTRACT

We introduce limbal rings (dark annulus around the iris of the eye) as a biological facial cue that illuminates the sclera (white of eye) and subsequently acts as a signal for source purity, a construct we distinguish from source trustworthiness. We argue the phenomenon observed is due to an eye purity metaphorical association effect, whereby consumers use the illuminated white of an eye as a metaphorical representation of purity. We also illustrate a source purity overgeneralization hypothesis, where source purity acts as the mechanism that consumers use to judge the purity of a source, and overgeneralize to other source and endorsement-based judgments. Across four experiments we manipulate the presence and type (thick versus thin; transparent versus opaque) of limbal rings (no limbal ring versus limbal ring), while controlling for product attractiveness, perceived spokesperson-product fit, and eye characteristics including eye shape, pupil, color, and gaze. Results demonstrate that a biological (or authentic) facial contrast cue (i.e., thick, opaque limbal rings) increases perceptions of source purity, which, in turn, enhances source trustworthiness judgments, attitude toward the advertisement, and attitude toward the brand. We demonstrate that source purity is a stronger predictor of source and endorsement-based judgments than source attractiveness. We also determine that the addition of an artificial (or inauthentic) facial contrast cue (i.e., cosmetic adornment on the eyes) attenuates the limbal ring effect, resulting in the dilution of source purity judgments, as well as trustworthiness and attractiveness perceptions, and advertisement and brand-based attitudes.

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1. Introduction

Psychologists suggest that individuals use the face as a source of information (Engell, Haxby, & Todorov, 2007), with the face playing a key role in signaling individual personality traits (Frith & Frith, 1999). The human eye, in particular, is viewed as the most notable facial feature (Davies & Hoffman, 2002), which is automatically attended to when first viewing a face (Adolphs et al., 2005). Eyes are said to be a highly conspicuous facial cue that provide information regarding an individual's temperament, behavior, and attitude (Kleisner, Kocnar, Frost, and Flegr, 2013). Further, research has found that specific characteristics of an eye influence a viewer's judgment of trustworthiness. For example, individuals with round (Akehurst, Köhnken, Vrij, & Bull, 1996), brown eyes (Kleisner, Priplatova, Frost and Flegr, 2013), discernable pupils (Sims et al., 2006), and a direct gaze looking at a target (Wyland & Forgas, 2010) are rated as more trustworthy.

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Recently, psychologists [Peshek, Semmaknejad, Hoffman, and Foley \(2011\)](#) highlight that limbal rings (dark annulus outlining the iris) also influence judgments. In their research, [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#) find that the presence of limbal rings enhances perceptions of physical attractiveness and suggest that limbal rings become less prominent with age; their presence is an indicator of youth and health. [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#) also propose that a preference for faces with limbal rings may be due to the way in which they enhance the whiteness and brightness of the sclera (white of the eye), increasing contrast in the region. We argue that this phenomenon, posited by [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#), is founded on edge integration theory within color perception literature ([Rudd, 2013](#)). Specifically, we suggest that limbal rings create a dark edge on the eye, which creates contrast between the black annulus and the white sclera of the eye, illuminating and brightening the sclera. We further propose that a metaphorical association occurs, whereby the contrast created by a limbal ring edge, which illuminates the whiteness of the eye, is suggested to be a metaphor representing the moral purity of the spokesperson.

Ecological theory in social perception proposes that certain facial information can produce biased perceptions through overgeneralization effects ([Zebrowitz, 1996, 1997; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2006](#)). For example, a babyface is overgeneralized to associated individual traits such as being naïve and honest ([Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008](#)). We propose that the source purity metaphorical association, conveyed through eye contrast in facial appearance, can create overgeneralization effects similar to those produced by babyfaces. Specifically, we propose and demonstrate an “eye purity metaphorical association effect” and a “source purity overgeneralization hypothesis,” whereby the contrast created by limbal rings are a metaphorical cue of the spokesperson’s purity, resulting in overgeneralization to other positive trait impressions of the spokesperson (i.e., trustworthiness and attractiveness), and endorsement-related judgments (i.e., ad attitude and brand attitude).

Study 1 demonstrates that the presence of limbal rings results in metaphorical association to perceptions of source purity, with source purity acting as the mechanism that explains how overgeneralization effects occur, enhancing source trustworthiness judgments as well as advertisement and brand attitudes. In Study 2, we demonstrate that the indirect effect of limbal rings on source and endorsement-based judgments are stronger when mediated by source purity as opposed to source attractiveness and determine that source purity overgeneralizes to perceptions of source attractiveness. We also empirically reveal the bounds of our eye purity metaphorical association effect and source purity overgeneralization hypothesis in Study 3. Specifically, the results provide evidence to suggest that the effectiveness of limbal rings (i.e., an authentic biological facial eye contrast feature, or an inherited feature or biological phenotype) on perceptions of source purity is attenuated when paired with inauthentic artificial facial eye contrast cues (i.e., cosmetics on the eye, or adornment or extended phenotype; [Etcoff, Stock, Haley, Vickery, & House, 2011](#)), subsequently diluting spokesperson trustworthiness and attractiveness judgments, as well as advertisement and brand attitudes.

2. Source purity cues and eye purity metaphorical association

While research investigating the effect of limbal ring presence on an individual’s judgments has been limited, [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#) have highlighted the strong signalling value of this eye characteristic. Limbal rings are biological, caused by pigmentation, or coloring, of the peripheral iris or by the internal optics of the eye (i.e., individual eye structure; see [Shyu & Wyatt, 2009](#)). Limbal rings become less visible with age and poor health (limbal ring thickness typically declines over time due to degenerative diseases such as glaucoma; [Peshek et al., 2011](#)). Findings from [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#) demonstrate that the presence of limbal rings enhances perceptions of attractiveness, with effects not moderated by either the gender of the source or the gender of the viewer. [Peshek et al. \(2011\)](#) show that perceptions of attractiveness are enhanced when limbal rings are present, and suggest that this effect may be due to their presence being a representation of health. The authors also propose, however, that limbal rings may enhance attractiveness judgments by signalling corneal clarity (i.e., the whiteness and brightness of the sclera; the eye’s white tough outer layer) and, therefore, increasing local contrast ([Peshek et al., 2011](#)). We argue and demonstrate that limbal rings act as a type of facial contrast cue, darkening the iris and, as a result, lightening the whiteness of the surrounding sclera.

[Itten’s color theory \(1973\)](#) suggests that contrast of hue (when a hue, or color, is separated and outlined by a black line) strengthens the appearance of the color, and also makes the adjacent color appear lighter. This theory is similar to that of edge integration theory within lightness perception literature ([Rudd, 2013](#)), which explains that an observer’s interpretation of illuminance or lightness is perceived at the edge point, or contrast point, where there is greatest polarity. In the case of limbal rings, where the black and white are the greatest point of color polarity in the eye, the limbal ring creates an edge that illuminates the white sclera of the eye. We propose that the white in the human eye is a metaphor for an individual’s moral purity, based on metaphorical association.

2.1. Metaphorical association: white as a metaphor for purity

Moral purity cannot be directly perceived through the senses, and as a result, individuals use metaphors when describing it ([Meier, Sellbom, & Wygant, 2007](#)). For example, “whiter than white” connotes having a reputation for high moral standards and “lily-white” refers to an individual being faultless in character ([Goatly, 2011](#)). Metaphor representation theory posits that abstract knowledge representation is aided by conceptual metaphors ([Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Meier & Robinson, 2004](#)). For example, [Sherman and Clore \(2009\)](#) examined automatic associations between words with moral and immoral meanings and the colors black and white. Results of their studies identified that words in black were perceived as immoral (e.g., greed) rather than moral, whereas words in white were perceived as moral (e.g., humble, respectful, kind) rather than immoral.

[Secord \(1958, p. 314\)](#) proposed a metaphorical association occurs when “the perceiver makes an abstract generalization based upon an analogy between some denotable characteristic of the object person and a personality attribute”. For example, [Berry and](#)

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