

## MORAL FLEXIBILITY IN CONSUMER JUDGMENT AND CHOICE

ACR 2010 Symposium Proposal

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### **Slam the good guys: Guilt over less ethical behavior results in denigration of ethical consumers**

Julie R. Irwin\* and Szu-Chi Huang, *University of Texas, Austin*

### **Sweatshop labor is wrong unless the jeans are really cute: Motivated moral disengagement.**

Neeru Paharia\* and Rohit Deshpandé, *Harvard Business School*; Kathleen Vohs, *University of Minnesota*

### **Choosing for the right reasons: Value-driven reasoning in consumer choice**

David Tannenbaum\*, *University of California-Irvine*; Daniel M. Bartels, *University of Chicago*

### **Commercial marketing with communal sentiments: Reframing taboo trade-offs in religious marketing.**

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Presenters (\*) agree to present if accepted, and data collection is complete for all the papers.

Research on moral judgment and choice often demonstrates that decision makers are extremely resistant to trade-offs involving their moral values; hence, the prevailing view is that moral values induce rigidity in decision making. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that this characterization is overly narrow and does not hold in many situations. The session contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the influence of values on consumer choice by showing that the role of moral values in judgment and choice is highly sensitive to context and the motives of the decision maker.

Moral judgment and choice is pervasive, and understanding the processes underlying value-driven judgment and choice is an important goal for consumer research. Indeed, the influence of moral values on how consumers think, feel, and behave is growing area of inquiry in consumer behavior. Moral values influence traditional behavioral economic phenomena (McGraw, Kristel, and Tetlock 2003), search decisions (Ehrich and Irwin 2005), and consumer rituals (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

How do moral values influence consumer reasoning and choice? The extant literature suggests that moral decisions are less driven by the consequences associated with an action than are more mundane decisions. Instead, moral decisions appear to be governed by moral rules concerning the ways certain values should be treated—namely, that moral values should not be traded off (e.g., “I won’t buy clothes from a sweatshop...”) regardless of the consequences (“...no matter how inexpensive they are.”). That moral decision-makers appear to be following proscriptions, rather than engaging in trade-offs between different values, has led to the characterization of decision-makers as rigidly beholden to their sacred values (e.g., Tetlock et al. 2000; Baron and Spranca 1997). Breaking from this tradition, the papers in this session intend to demonstrate that moral decision making is quite flexible; it doesn’t necessarily abide by these rigid processing principles. Instead, how moral values influence judgment and choice is highly dependent on context and the motives of the consumer. Shifting people’s focus from choice processes to outcomes, for example, can result in preference reversals in moral choice (Bartels and Medin, 2007). Also, simple rhetorical redefinitions of tradeoffs into non-market terms can transform morally distressing situations into morally acceptable ones (McGraw and Tetlock 2005).

The session can significantly influence future work in the developing area of moral consumer research by further showing the many ways that the characterization of moral consumer choice is overly narrow and fails to capture moral flexibility. The session will offer a broad perspective on the ways in which moral values influence consumer judgment and choice.

The first paper (Irwin and Huang) examines reactions to ethical behavior in others. A logical reaction to seeing others behave morally would be to feel inspired, and to admire the behavior and

attempt to emulate it. Instead, the authors find the opposite: instead of expressing admiration, consumers are more likely to denigrate ethical consumers, especially when they themselves have not behaved ethically, an effect driven primarily by guilt.

In the second paper, (Paharia, Deshpande, and Vohs) examine how moral judgments vary based on context. While many consumers say they care about issues such as sweatshop labor, the existence of a very small market for ethically-produced products does not reflect this sentiment. The authors show that consumers are motivated to use moral disengagement strategies to reduce dissonance when their desire for a product conflicts with their moral standards.

The third paper (Tannenbaum and Bartels) examines how the expression of ‘protected values’ depends crucially on the choice context eliciting their expression. When presented with ethically-relevant information about consumer products, participants with a protected value are both more *and* less willing to choose products that maximize consequences. Choices vary depending on the choice context — on what information is made salient and what reasons are available for making a decision.

The final paper (McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock) examines emotional reactions to consumer perceptions of religious organizations using marketing techniques. While consumers believe that it is morally wrong for churches to use commercial marketing techniques, their moral distress can be assuaged by simple rhetorical justifications that transform a market-based action into a communal-based action. This was especially so for consumers who were most strongly affiliated with the church.

In sum, the papers represent a theoretical advance from an overly simplistic view of morally-motivated judgment and choice. The session will unify the findings of the individual papers into a broader framework for investigating the impact on moral flexibility for understanding consumer cognition and choice. Research on moral flexibility will contribute to an integrated framework for understanding two contrasting (and descriptively incomplete) models of morally-motivated consumer choice — that of the value maximizer and that of the rigid moral rule follower — by re-thinking the moral decision-maker as someone who is both principled and flexible in making a moral decision.

Three “big picture” questions will stimulate the discussion of the papers in this session: 1) The papers in this symposium show that moral flexibility is subject to contextual and motivational influences. What other influences might shape moral flexibility?; 2) How are moral flexibility effects different than the effects of context shown in highly involved consumers?; 3) If moral flexibility is as pervasive as implied by this session, what implications does this have for policy initiatives and policy communication?

## SHORT ABSTRACTS

### **Slam the good guys: Guilt over less ethical behavior results in denigration of ethical consumers** (Irwin and Huang)

We test whether, instead of expressing admiration, consumers denigrate more ethical consumers. They do, but only when they feel guilty (because acting ethical was easy to do and they avoided it), and once they denigrate ethical consumers they are actually less likely to participate in future ethical behaviors.

### **Sweatshop Labor is wrong unless the jeans are really cute: Motivated moral disengagement.** (Paharia, Deshpandé, and Vohs)

We show that consumers are motivated to use moral disengagement strategies to reduce dissonance when their desire for a product conflicts with their moral standards. In a series of studies we show levels of moral disengagement can vary based on one’s desire for a product when sweatshop labor is present.

### **Choosing for the right reasons: Value-driven reasoning in consumer choice** (Tannenbaum and Bartels)

When presented with ethically-relevant information about consumer products, participants with a protected value are both more *and* less willing to choose products that maximize ethically-relevant consequences. Their choices vary depending upon what reasons are available for making a (moral) decision.

**Commercial marketing with communal sentiments: Reframing taboo trade-offs in religious marketing.** (McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock)

Although consumers typically expect organizations to profit from commercial marketing, they believe that certain organizations, like churches, should focus on communal goals. We document consumer distress when religious organizations use commercial-marketing strategies and examine how communal justifications reduce moral distress.

### LONG ABSTRACTS

**Slam the good guys: Guilt over less ethical behavior results in denigration of ethical consumers** (Irwin and Huang)

It has been suggested that observing others behaving ethically inspires admiration and “other-praising” (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Haidt 2001). We explore a less positive response to ethical others, especially among consumers who themselves have not behaved ethically. We examine the process by which behaving less ethically can result in “slamming” people who behave more ethically than we do, with the goal of preserving self-esteem.

Individuals gain self-esteem from thinking of themselves as moral and that they reconcile conflicts between their perceived morality and actual behavior in the direction of preserving self-esteem (Batson et al. 1999). Despite the motivation to perceive the self as highly moral, individuals frequently fail to carry out ethical behaviors in the market place. Many motivations, such as the desire to avoid reading about uncomfortable information (e.g., Ehrich and Irwin 2005) or the beliefs about moral tradeoffs (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin and Raghunathan in press), often lead consumers to avoid ethical information even when they care about the underlying issues.

Our project focuses on what happens after a consumer fails to act ethically (e.g., fails to seek out ethical information in order to make an informed ethical choice) in the market. We propose that after behaving less ethically, consumers denigrate other consumers who would have acted more ethically than they did. We show that guilt underlies these judgments, and that reducing guilt reduces the denigration. Furthermore, we show that the denigration reduces future ethical behavior.

In Study 1, participants chose between four pairs of jeans that differed on: style, price, manufacturer size and either manufacturers’ labor practices (i.e., whether their factories employed children, the ethical condition) or manufacturers’ delivery time (control condition). All of the attribute information was initially hidden and participants could choose to view the contents for two out of the four attributes before making their product choices. Thus, participants overwhelmingly chose to view price and style, not the fourth piece of information (labor practice or delivery time). We expected that only the participants in the ethical attribute condition would feel that their ethical self-view had been threatened from not choosing the fourth attribute. After choosing the attributes and the jeans, participants rated consumers who “ask about the labor practices used to produce their clothes (i.e., whether child labor was used) before buying them”. Only a few participants viewed the fourth attribute; they were eliminated from the analysis. Our results supported our hypothesis of “slamming” the good guys: not viewing information about manufacturers’ labor practices (vs. delivery time) resulted in significantly more unfavorable ratings of ethical others on both positive (e.g., fashionable and attractive) and negative (e.g., boring and preachy) characteristics.

In Study 2, participants could view the attribute value information for either one, two, or four (i.e., all) attributes before making product choices. We expected the two attribute condition to produce more

threat than the other two conditions. Indeed, the denigration and self-esteem was statistically equivalent in the one and four/all attribute conditions. In addition, we measured self-esteem either right before or right after the (possible) denigration. Participants in the threatening two-attribute condition had significantly lower self-esteem prior to denigration, and were significantly more likely to denigrate ethical others. After denigrating others, self-esteem and ethical self-view were restored to the same level as groups who did not feel threatened, indicating that the denigration served its psychological purpose.

Study 3 tested our hypothesis using backpacks and a different ethical attribute (recycled content of materials). Participants could view information about one, two, or four (material, price, function, and recycled content) attributes. Participants made product choices and either evaluated ethical others or did not. In this study, in the “chance to denigrate” condition we allowed them to both rate others and to provide open-ended evaluation of “people who might check the recycling practices of the firms that make their backpacks”. Also, at the end of the task all participants were invited to take a “Think Green” online pledge to sign up for e-newsletters about easy ways to be green. Both the open-ended responses and the ratings scales replicated the denigration results (i.e., more denigration in the threat condition). In addition, we also found that participants who were threatened (i.e., who were in the two-attribute condition) showed a significant difference in future ethical behavior depending on whether they were given the opportunity to denigrate. The more they denigrated others, the less likely they were to take the environmental pledge. In other words, denigration restored self-esteem to such an extent that it actually reduced future moral behavior.

Thus, consumers do not, at least in our context, respond with admiration to ethical behavior. Instead, they denigrate ethical consumers. We suggest that awe and other positive emotions may be more likely when guilt is absent; it may be easier to avoid denigration when self-esteem is not threatened.

### **Sweatshop Labor is wrong unless the jeans are really cute: Motivated moral disengagement.** (Paharia, Deshpandé, and Vohs)

We examine whether people may be motivated to morally disengage (Bandura 1991, 1999) in the presence of harmful attributes such as sweatshop labor when desire for a product is high. We show that moral disengagement can be driven by affective desire for a product. Mechanisms of moral disengagement may allow consumers to perceive their desire for products made with sweatshop labor to be consistent with their moral standards (Tsang 2002) enabling them to avoid dissonance (Festinger 1957). We demonstrate that levels of moral disengagement can be motivated by one’s level of desire for a product made with sweatshop labor. Furthermore, we show a full mediated moderation where beliefs about sweatshop labor use moderates the impact of desirability on purchase intention, and moral disengagement mediates this process.

In experiment 1 participants were told about a hypothetical pair of jeans where sweatshop labor was either present or not. Participants were then asked about their desire for the jeans and answered questions on moral disengagement. We predicted that when sweatshop labor was present, there would be a stronger positive association between desire for a product and moral disengagement than when no sweatshop labor was present. In the *high sweatshop labor* condition participants first read: *Imagine that you are shopping and found the perfect pair of jeans. They look good on you and fit great. [A large amount of sweatshop labor was used to produce these jeans.]* In the *no sweatshop labor* condition the text in brackets was replaced by the following: *No sweatshop labor was used to produce these jeans.* Participants were first asked about their desirability for the jeans and then asked about moral disengagement. The moral disengagement measures were adapted from Bandura et al.’s (1996) original scale, and participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with the following four statements: 1. *The use of sweatshop labor is okay because otherwise those workers would not have jobs;* 2. *Without sweatshops poorer countries couldn’t develop;* 3. *Buying clothes that are made with sweatshop labor is okay if it saves the consumer money because clothes are not affordable;* and: 4. *The use of sweatshop labor is okay because companies must remain competitive and all other*

*companies do it.* We found levels of moral disengagement to be significantly higher when desirability for a product was high and sweatshop labor was present. In the case where sweatshop labor was not present, there was no significant association between desirability and moral disengagement. Experiment 1 gives us cause to believe that moral disengagement may be motivated by one's desirability for a product.

In experiment 2, (in a 2X2 between subjects design) participants first read about the desirability of a hypothetical pair of Nike shoes. In the *high desirability* condition participants read: *Imagine that you own a pair of Nike running shoes. [The shoes retail for \$175.00 and you got them at a 75% discount. You are extremely happy with these shoes.]* In the *low desirability* condition the text in brackets was replaced by the following: *The shoes retail for \$175.00 and you got them at a 5% discount. You are satisfied with these shoes.* After answering this initial set of questions on desirability participants clicked through to the next page and were told about Nike's labor practices. In the *high sweatshop labor* condition participants read: *Imagine that you've just read an article that suggests that Nike [uses] sweatshop labor to make their shoes.* In the *no sweatshop labor* condition the text in brackets was replaced by: *does not use.* Participants then answered questions on moral disengagement, and asked about their beliefs about Nike's true use of sweatshop labor. Participants then answered a second set desirability questions that were identical to the first set. Finally participants were asked about purchase intention. We found that measures of moral disengagement were higher for *high desirability* products than for *low desirability* products when sweatshop labor was present; however we did not find this effect in the *no sweatshop labor* condition. Furthermore, we show a full mediated moderation where beliefs about high sweatshop labor use are associated with an *increased* purchase intention for high desirability products; however this effect does not hold for low desirability products.

In a follow up study we demonstrate the effects of moral disengagement can be attenuated when participants are put under cognitive load. More specifically, a positive association between one's desire for a product and level of moral disengagement disappears once participants are put under load. Such finding suggests that limiting one's cognitive resources may reduce desire-driven moral disengagement.

As we are confronted with conflicts between our desires, and our moral standards on nearly a daily basis it behooves us to carefully consider how our desires, in particular, drive us to morally disengage from harmful behavior. If our moral judgments vary based on our affective desires, any moral standards we may hold ourselves to are dubious at best, and desire-driven moral disengagement may broadly contribute towards the tolerance of harm in our social and economic systems.

### **Choosing for the right reasons: Value-driven reasoning in consumer choice** (Tannenbaum and Bartels)

Even if consumers do not always succeed in choosing outcomes that make them happier, healthier, or wealthier, they usually try their best to do so. In this way, most choices consumers make reflect a desire to maximize consequences. Some moral choices involving protected values, however, are more driven by proscriptions than by consequences (e.g., "do not allow companies to pollute for a fee, even if the fee helps reduce pollution"). In four studies, we examine how thinking about proscriptions and consequences may depend on the decision maker's initial preferences and on the situational context. We find that when presented with ethically-relevant information, consumers with a 'protected value' are both more *and* less consequentialist in their choices than consumers without protected values. Because PV consumers care deeply about the issue at hand, their choices vary based on what information they attend to (Bartels 2008) and what reasons are available for the choice (Shafir 1993).

In the first three studies, we presented participants with descriptions of each option's non-ethical attributes (e.g., workmanship and comfort ratings) and collected desirability ratings. Later, we presented them with ethically-relevant information (e.g., whether a desk used unsustainable rainforest wood) and assessed preferences for one option over the other.

Study 1 pitted an attractive product that used rainforest wood against a less attractive product that did not. The more attractive desk was described, depending upon condition, as constructed from

rainforest wood that caused unmitigated harm to the environment (“Impoverished Harm”) or from rainforest wood whose harm was mitigated through the planting of trees that resulted in a net gain for the environment (“Enriched Harm”). Only participants with a PV were likely to choose the more unattractive desk, and this was the case in both the Impoverished Harm and Enriched Harm conditions. When the choice context allows for one to honor a PV — with at least one option not causing harm to the rainforest — then subjects with PVs tend to choose on this basis, regardless of the consequences entailed and regardless of their initial preferences.

Study 2 was similar to Study 1, except now participants could choose only between the Impoverished and Enriched Harm conditions. Now, participants with a PV were most likely to choose the Enriched Harm option. When the choice context did not allow for honoring a PV — with both options caused some degree of harm — then subjects with a PV made more consequentialist choices than subjects without a PV, regardless of their initial preferences.

Study 3 examined if the previous two findings — that subjects with a PV can be both more and less consequentialist depending on the choice context — is the result of moral posturing or value-driven choice. A moral posturing account would explain this pattern by arguing that participants with a PV still wish to choose the more attractive desk (even if it causes more harm), but only have a reasonable excuse to do so in Study 2. A value-driven choice account would argue that participants with a PV will choose to not actively cause harm so long as they have the ability to do so (when they do not have that option, they will instead choose to maximize consequences). Study 3 was designed to pit these two accounts against each other. Participants now chose between three options: (i) a less attractive, No Harm option, (ii) a more attractive, Enriched Harm option, and (iii) a symmetrically-dominated very unattractive, very harmful option. Consistent with the value-driven choice account, participants with a PV tended to choose the No Harm option that honored their protected value even though they could justify choosing the more attractive, Enriched Harm option because it was both more attractive and caused less harm than the dominated option.

Our final study explored the role of reasons in explaining how participants made a value-driven decision. For Study 4, participants judged which of two companies was (depending upon condition) either more moral or more immoral. Similar to Study 2, one company's actions embodied Impoverished Harm and the other Enriched Harm. Subjects with a PV were more likely than non-PV subjects to both accept the enriched option as morally superior and reject it as morally inferior.

In sum, consumers with a PV are more likely than consumers without a PV to make use of ethical attribute information when presented with such information. If one or more options satisfies the proscription to do no harm — even if it is unattractive or other options might maximize consequences — they opt for the No Harm choice. If all available options cause some degree of harm, however, consumers with PVs maximize ethically-relevant consequences, regardless of their initial preferences. Consumers without a PV, however, choose according to their initial preferences.

### **Commercial marketing with communal sentiments: Reframing taboo trade-offs in religious marketing.** (McGraw, Schwartz, and Tetlock)

While consumers typically expect businesses to profit from the marketing of goods and services, they believe that some organizations should be more focused on accomplishing communal goals than making a profit. When communally-focused organizations do use commercial marketing strategies, consumers react as though a taboo has been breached (Tetlock 2002). For example, consumers find it morally distressing to see churches using steadfast commercial-marketing strategies like advertising, rebranding, and outsourcing (e.g., McDaniel 1996). People will respond with a mix of moral outrage (condemn the perpetrators) and moral cleansing (distance oneself from the transgressors; Tetlock et al. 2000; McGraw, Tetlock, and Kristel 2003). This creates negative consequences for the organization; people stop using services or they spread negative word-of-mouth.

We investigate the ability of organizations to conceal or assuage taboo trade-offs. As a case study, we examine people's reactions to the use of marketing techniques by religious organizations. Churches compete with the secular world for the allegiance of worshipers, and churches are increasingly resorting to the same marketing techniques that corporations use to recruit, retain, and serve customers (e.g., Schlesinger and Mellado 1991, Symonds 2005). But not everyone finds these techniques acceptable; people can be horrified when churches use violent video games to recruit young people (Richtel 2007).

The project draws on work by McGraw and Tetlock (2005) that examines how rhetorical redefinitions (i.e., relational framing) change the perceived normative 'rules' at work for a strategy in order to assuage the unsettling nature of a taboo trade-off. We test the effectiveness of organizational justifications that reframe market interventions to have a communal focused (i.e., priorities and offerings based on cooperative and relationship-building principles; see Fiske 1991). If marketing techniques are rhetorically disguised through communal-focused endeavors, the church gets both market efficiency and loyalty. But if rhetorical disguises fail, market-based techniques may compromise the moral branding and sanctity of the church.

In Study 1a, we presented participants twelve marketing strategies that an organization was considering using. The strategies were pretested to vary along a continuum from communally-focused (e.g., provide child care for members) to market-focused (e.g., institute a rebranding strategy). We find that neither communal nor market focused strategies affected the judged acceptability of the marketing strategies used by a credit union, a secular market-driven organization. For a religious organization, however, judgments of acceptability were strongly influenced by the focus of the strategy. As the strategy became more communally focused as opposed to market focused the strategy was viewed as increasingly more acceptable. In Study 1b, we show that negative reactions to commercial marketing techniques by a church mediate people's desire to affiliate with the organization.

Study 2 investigated the effect of presenting communal-sharing justifications for market interventions conducted by a church. We found that distress with the Catholic Church's practice of outsourcing prayers to India due to a shortage of U.S. Priests was mitigated by invoking the shared world-wide communality of Priests, a justification that emphasizes the communal nature of the church across national boundaries. Reported distress in a market-pricing justification condition ("matching supply and demand in the market for prayer service, thus maximizing prayers and revenue generation") was no different than that of a control condition that featured no justification, which indicated that respondents spontaneously assumed and rebuffed the church's market-based intervention.

Study 2 also investigated who is most affected by communal justifications. We hypothesized that those who have the greatest moral stake in the organization would be most motivated to seize on the communal justification and thus show the greatest reduction in distress. We found that consumers who most regularly attend religious services were most persuaded by communal reframing justification.

In a third study, we demonstrate that moral outrage with outsourcing prayer was linked to moral contamination and not socially desirable responding. To do so, we drew on the Lady Macbeth effect, whereby people feel physically tainted by morally upsetting information and seek physical cleansing opportunities to symbolically cleanse themselves (Zhong and Liljenquist 2006). Indeed, respondents exposed to the outsourcing decision without a communal justification showed the greatest preference for cleaning products (e.g., Tide detergent) relative to non-cleaning products (e.g., post-it notes).

Marketing is commonly used to add value to consumer experience and build brand relationships. However, certain categories of marketing tactics appear to be disturbing to consumers when they believe the organization ought to be acting in communal ways. We show that distress with religious marketing is assuaged by simple rhetorical tactics that transform market actions into communal actions.

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