When Is It Better to Be Bad? Schema-Congruency Effects in Moral Evaluations of Products

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This paper investigates the effects of a product’s moral history on consumer preferences. Although people generally prefer products associated with moral individuals, when the same product is framed in a vice context (i.e., for partying), participants are more likely to purchase products invented by an immoral (versus moral) person.

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Extended Abstract

All things being equal, people prefer good things over bad. People seek pleasure, and avoid pain (Bentham 1779, James 1890, Higgins 1997). Within psychology, the approach-avoidance hierarchy has dominated the motivation literature (Elliot 2006). Perception researchers have shown that stimuli are classified into positive and negative with only 30 milliseconds of subliminal presentation (Stapel, Koomen & Ruys, 2002, Osgood 1955). Across multiple disciplines, people are believed to quickly classify targets into high level categories of “good/approach” and “bad/avoid”.

Managers have embraced this perspective in their marketing communication tactics. Brands spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year on celebrity endorsements, with the logic of associating their product with a persona that consumers already like to gain some halo effect. Recent events have shown that if a spokesperson’s image shifts to bad or immoral, managers are quick to disassociate themselves from the disgraced endorser. Yet is it always the case that any association with an immoral figure is bad for a product? The present research proposes that in certain cases a product may benefit from association with an immoral persona.

Previous research has demonstrated that individuals’ appraisals of a new product may be dependent on the degree to which the product’s features and the activated category schema are congruent (Aggarwal and McGill 2007; Meyers-Levy and Tybout 1989). In general, objects that are schema congruent are evaluated more favorably than objects that are schema incongruent because people tend to like objects that conform to their expectations. People may transfer positive affect about the fit between the product’s features and their beliefs about the category (e.g., satisfaction for schema congruent products) to the object itself (Fiske 1982).

Consistent with the findings of previous schema congruency research, we hypothesized that consumers would be more likely to prefer vice products invented by immoral creators as compared to vice products invented by moral creators or virtue products invented by immoral creators. Specifically, if a product is framed for use in a vice behavior context, we predict that consumers will be more interested in purchasing it when it was created by an immoral person.

The present studies directly tested the effects of a product’s moral history on consumer preferences. Across four studies we manipulated the moral history of the product and the product’s framing. In study 1 participants read a story describing the inventor of an energy drink as moral or immoral, then were told that the energy drink was intended to “provide the extra energy needed for studying for exams and working hard (partying with friends and having fun) throughout the long hours of the night”. The results of Study 1 support our predictions. Specifically, when a product (e.g., an energy drink) is positioned for use in a virtuous context, people prefer the moral inventor–perhaps due to expertise on the part of the inventor in the behavioral domains. We conducted Study 2 in order to rule out
these alternate explanations, and to investigate the role of similarity between inventor and framing as a possible mediator of the effect. In Study 2 participants read the same history and framing background story, but we added additional conditions so that some subjects were told that the manufacturer had been unable to secure the rights to that formula invented by the immoral (moral inventor), and instead was using a different recipe to produce the energy drink. The results indicate that participants prefer the energy drink as a party aid only when it was made from the EXACT FORMULA of the immoral inventor $F(1, 637)=5.36, p=0.021$. Next, when probed for beliefs about the effectiveness of the drink at keeping them awake, subjects in the vice (virtuous) framing did not believe that the drink would be less effective for a virtuous (vice) activity, ($M_{party}=2.25, M_{study}=2.32, F(1,641)=2.38, ns.$). Study 2 replicated our initial findings, ruled out two major alternative explanations, and provides initial evidence of schema congruency as a mediator.

Study 3 replicated the effect in another domain: that of art and artists. Subjects were presented shown an ambiguous piece of art (“Tunnel”) and the moral history of the artist and his intended framing of the art were manipulated. The predicted interaction emerged for history (moral, immoral, very immoral) X framing (positive or dark), $F(2,165)=3.02, p=0.051$, providing further evidence that when products are framed in dark or vice ways, people tend to prefer immoral creators.

This congruency effect persists across multiple product domains and in spite of the fact that participants explicitly rate the immoral target as morally corrupt and unlikable. Therefore, in addition to providing a test of the effects of moral judgments on product evaluations, these studies provide some of the first experimental evidence that in certain contexts, people may prefer products associated with immoral individuals. These patterns are interpreted within the broader framework of essentialism and schema congruency, and the implications for marketing, social policy and academic theory are discussed.

Selected References


Anchoring Unveiled

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Extended Abstract

Nearly all studies of anchoring ask participants to first make a comparative judgment, and then render an estimate. Within this paradigm, the dominant psychological account of anchoring is that people actively compare their estimate to the anchor, thereby increasing the accessibility of anchor consistent information (Strack and Mussweiler 1997). A second account suggests a more deliberate process in which people start with the anchor value, and then adjust it until the proximate boundary of plausible ranges is reached (Jaccowitz and Kahneman 1995). A third account implicates the conversational norm that provided information is relevant (Grice 1975, Schwarz 1999).

Though anchoring effects have been found even in contexts that should help control for some of these possibilities (like the use of manifestly random anchors, Tversky and Kahneman 1974), little work has attempted to assess the comparative influence of these different forces either between or within studies.

The present research is intended to test the comparative importance of these mechanisms in the traditional paradigm. We manipulated the source of the anchor and quantified the magnitude of the anchoring effect. In condition A, anchors were manifestly unrelated to the comparative question: they were generated by the participants (e.g. by taking a bill out of their wallet and entering the first two digits of the serial number as the anchor). This design was intended to minimize inferences about the informational value of the anchor. The other three conditions were “yoked” to the numbers these respondents self generated, resulting in 90 perfectly yoked “quartets”. Within each quartet, for each value entered by a participant in condition A there was one and only one condition B, C and D participant who saw that value as their respective anchors. In condition B, the yoked anchors were provided and the instructions indicated (falsely) that the anchor
Applied ethics refers to moral conclusions based on rules, standards, code of ethics and models that help guide decisions. There are many subdivisions in the field of ethics; some of the common ones are descriptive, normative and comparative ethics. Business ethics, more specifically, deals with the creation and application of moral standards in the business environment. Morals are judgments, standards and rules of good conduct in the society. They guide people toward permissible behavior with regard to basic values. Consider the following dilemma and how the terms values, ethics and morals apply. A thief named Zar guarantees that you will receive the agreed upon confidential information from your competitor in five days. Moral Self-Licensing selected products from an array that contained either mostly green items (e.g., an energy-efficient light bulb) or mostly conventional items (e.g., a regular light bulb). Participants who chose from the mostly green array were more likely to purposefully make inaccurate judgments in a subsequent task in order to win money, and to take more of the experimenter’s money than they had legitimately won.

Moral Self-Licensing. Do good deeds provide moral credits or moral credentials? One version of licensing states that it feels ne to commit bad deeds as long as they are offset by prior good deeds of a similar magnitude (Nisan, 1991). The metaphor is one of a moral bank account: good deeds establish moral credits (cf. Although the importance of symbolic product meaning is well established, controlled studies accounting for relations between specific symbolic meanings and product appearance are sparse. In part, this relates to the fact that consumer products specifically and visual communications in general, are complex stimuli comprising multiple visual elements (e.g., shape, typeface, and color) through which symbolic meanings are communicated. In order to account for consumer perceptions of product symbolism, it is, therefore, important for carriers of product meaning other than shape to be taken into account. Participants were told that they were participating in an evaluation study exploring consumers’ impressions of a new (fictitious) brand of soft drinks.