Judgments of Virtue in Consumer Behavior

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We investigate judgments of virtue in consumer behavior, and show that evaluations of virtue differ across two types of decisions. For intertemporal choice decisions (e.g., present self vs. future self), willpower determines judgments of virtue. However, for moral decisions (e.g., self vs. others), purity of character determines judgments of virtue.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research on consumer behavior is thick with moral connotations: virtues and “shoulds” benefit a future self, whereas vices and “wants” benefit the present self. Yet theories of morality involve helping or harming others, and would not consider many of these decisions to be moral, in spite of the moral subtext. In the current research, we explore how people understand the meaning of virtue across high-morality and low-morality decisions.

In doing so, we focus on two key determinants of virtue: (1) willpower (i.e. an ability to exert self-control to overcome temptation) and (2) purity of character (i.e. not feeling tempted by a vice). We propose that for low-morality decisions (e.g. whether to cheat on a diet), willpower signals virtue: someone who resists temptation will be seen as more virtuous than someone who is not tempted by a vice. However, for high-morality decisions a vice will be seen as more virtuous than someone who resists temptation.

In Study 1, participants read scenarios involving two individuals who each choose a vice over a vice. However, only one individual felt tempted by the vice, while the other did not feel tempted by the vice. In one condition, the scenarios included low-morality decisions (cheating on a diet; procrastinating schoolwork; avoiding exercise) whereas in the other condition, the decisions were all highly moral in nature (committing adultery; stealing office supplies; failing to donate a kidney).

Participants directly compared the two individuals on a Relative Virtue scale centered at zero, whereby positive numbers indicate that the person who resisted temptation was considered more virtuous, and negative numbers indicate that the person who did not feel tempted was considered more virtuous. Results show that for low-morality decisions, the person who exerted willpower and overcame temptation is judged to be more virtuous than the one who was not tempted by the vice (Low-morality Ms > 0.30; ts > 2.3, ps < .023). However, for high-morality decisions, the person who overcame temptation is judged to be less virtuous than the one who was not tempted by the vice (High-morality Ms < -0.65; ts < -4.99, ps < .001).

In Study 2 we directly measure perceptions of willpower and purity to provide mediation evidence of our theory. We also test the robustness of our effects in Study 2 by having participants only read about a single individual rather than comparing two individuals directly. In addition to contrasting individuals who are and are not tempted by a vice, we further examine a new situation whereby an individual used to feel tempted by a vice, but has since eliminated their unwanted urges, and no thus longer feels tempted by it. We refer to this person as being reformed.

For low-morality decisions, we argue that judgments of virtue are based on willpower. Individuals who are reformed are likely to be seen as strong willed, and will be considered more virtuous than those who have never felt tempted by a vice. For high-morality decisions we argue that judgments of virtue are primarily based on purity of character. Individuals who are reformed will have eliminated their desire for a vice, and will be seen as more pure than those who still feel tempted by a vice. However, their previous immoral thoughts still reflect an underlying impurity. Thus, we predict that for high-morality decisions, those who are reformed will be considered more virtuous than those who resist temptation, but less virtuous than those with a natural distaste for the vice.

In this study, we conducted a 2 (Morality: Low, High) x 3 (Temptation Level: Tempted, Not Tempted, Reformed) between subjects design. Specifically, an individual named Kevin was faced with either a highly moral decision (cheating on a spouse or not) or a low-morality decision (eating a dessert or not). Kevin was either described as feeling tempted by the vice (Tempted condition), not feeling tempted by the vice (Not Tempted condition), or as being formerly tempted by the vice, but no longer (Reformed condition). In all cases he chose the virtuous option.

A two-way ANOVA showed a significant morality x temptation level interaction (F(2, 216) = 26.75, p < .001). Follow up analysis examines the Low Morality and High Morality conditions separately.

Low Morality: Replicating our previous findings, participants in the Tempted condition (M = 6.56, SD = 1.37) rated Kevin to be more virtuous than those in the Not Tempted condition (M = 4.58, SD = 1.77; t(72) = 5.55, p < .001). Further, participants in the Reformed condition (M = 6.68, SD = 1.41) rated Kevin to be more virtuous than those in the Not Tempted condition (t(73) = 5.94, p < .001). Ratings of virtue did not significantly differ between the Tempted condition and the Reformed condition (t(71) = 0.33, p = .74).

High Morality: Replicating our previous findings, participants in the Not Tempted condition (M = 7.35, SD = 1.08) rated Kevin to be more virtuous than did those in the Tempted condition (M = 5.69, SD = 2.12; t(72) = 4.23, p < .001). Further, participants in the Reformed condition (M = 6.53, SD = 1.72) rated Kevin to be more virtuous than those in the Tempted condition (t(72) = 2.14, p = .034) but less virtuous than those in the Not Tempted condition (t(73) = 2.10, p = .038).

In addition to these results, we further show mediation evidence that judgments of virtue for low-morality decisions are driven by willpower whereas judgments of virtue for high-morality decisions are driven by purity of character.

In sum, we show how the meaning of virtue differs across low- and high-morality decisions. When a decision is highly moral, individuals look towards purity of character when evaluating virtue, but when a decision is low in morality, individuals look towards willpower to evaluate virtue.