Divine Intervention: How Illusory Causal Perception Reduces Consumer Punishment After Bad Things Happen to Bad Firms

Jae-Eun Namkoong, University of Nevada Reno, USA
Jerry (Jisang) Han, University of Texas at Austin, USA
Andrew Gershoff, University of Texas at Austin, USA

Consumers’ desire to punish a transgressor firm can decrease if the firm had also suffered an unrelated loss. Experiments demonstrate that, for individuals with accessible religious beliefs, arbitrary similarities between the transgression and loss trigger causal perception that the loss was a punishment, lowering their desire to harm the firm.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1019819/volumes/v43/NA-43

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Divine Intervention: How Illusory Causal Perception Reduces Consumer Punishment

Jae-Eun Namkoong, University of Nevada, Reno, USA
Jerry J. Han, University of Texas at Austin, USA
Andrew D. Gershoff, University of Texas at Austin, USA

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

SOMETIMES FIRMS CAUSE HARM. Yet, sometimes the same firms are victims of harm. For example, Apple computer’s production system was recently accused for polluting, but elsewhere they suffered significant damage from a factory explosion (Barboza 2011). Prior research shows that when consumers learn a firm has committed a transgression, they are likely to engage in retaliatory behavior (Folkes 1984). However, will the retaliatory behavior be tempered if they learn that the firm has also suffered a loss? We argue that this depends on factors that influence whether consumers perceive causality between the transgression and the unrelated loss.

Previous work explored consumers’ attitudes toward punishing others who have violated norms. An important finding is that once a violator is perceived to have been punished, even if by others, further punishment intent is diminished (Lin, Dahl, and Argo 2013). We extend this line of work by examining situations in which a firm has faced no actual punishment at all. Instead we look at situations when a consumer may infer that punishment has occurred by drawing a causal relationship between a firms’ transgression and a coincidental harm to the firm. When this occurs, consumers are more likely to believe that the firm has “paid its dues” and thus are less likely to call for future punishment.

Our research studies the joint effect of external cues and individual factors on determining causal perceptions. Previous research emphasized the role of resemblance in determining which in a list of potential causes stand out as more probable (LeBoeuf and Norton 2012; Nisbett and Ross 1980). We contribute to this line of research by demonstrating when arbitrary similarities as external cues facilitate a causal perception between two independent events belonging in separate domains, with no inherent reason to assume they are causally related. We refer to arbitrary similarities in this article as coincidental similarities between elements of a firm’s transgression and elements of an unrelated negative event that happened to the firm. For example, if a natural fire spread to the same factory that used rotten food ingredients, the similarity between the two events (i.e., their locations) may lead some individuals to believe that the fire and the firm’s wrongdoing are causally related.

We also demonstrate that individuals with highly accessible belief in a higher power rely on similarity cues and readily make causal attributions based on them. An important self-regulatory function served by a belief in a higher power is providing a sense of meaning for future punishment. After Bad Things Happen to Bad Firms

REFERENCES


