Moral Malleability and Morality Matching: Consumer Deviance in Response to Company Wrongdoing

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This research examines the relationship between company wrongdoing, consumer deviance, and morality. We propose and test in four studies a model of morality matching in which consumers temporarily reset their own moral compass following company wrongdoing to allow for their otherwise immoral response of matching severity to deem appropriate.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The present research explores the impact of a company’s wrongdoing on the likelihood and moral nature of deviant consumer behavior on the part of even mainstream consumers, which can be detrimental to companies and the marketplace more generally. Specifically, what conditions lead consumers to act in a deviant (immoral) manner? We examine the relationship between company wrongdoing, consumer deviance, and morality. We propose a model of morality matching in which consumers temporarily alter their own moral compass (moral malleability) in the face of company wrongdoing. We show that the more immoral company actions are perceived to be, the greater the moral anger consumers experience and likely will respond in kind, that is with acts of deviance that appear to match the company wrongdoing in the perceived degree of immorality (morality matching).

In an idealistic marketplace setting, firms and customers engage in relationships and transactions that are equitable to both parties. However, in reality, things happen. Companies do not always act in an appropriate or fair manner towards their customers. And customers do not always act appropriately towards companies. Yet, little is known about the relationship, if any, between a firm’s wrongdoing (i.e., treating consumers unfairly/immorally) and consumer responses. For example, will a consumer who perceives to have been treated unfairly retaliate through more typical responses to service failure (e.g., complain, defect, and so on) or use the company’s wrongdoing to temporarily alter their own moral standards to respond with wrongdoing of their own? Although, past research suggests that consumers may engage in a host of deviant (i.e., unfair/immoral) behaviors with or without provocation from the firm, little is known about what prompts mainstream consumers to engage in such deviance. The focal objective of this research is to better understand when, how, and why consumers engage in immoral (deviant) behavior particularly following company wrongdoing.

We refer to company wrongdoing as a service situation in which the consumer perceives company actions (or inaction) as immoral to some degree and experiences moral anger. Prior research shows that some consumers outraged by the wrongdoing of a company will sabotage their well-being and punish the firm at a cost to themselves (Bechwati and Morrin 2003). Hence, we consider both company wrongdoing and deviant responses by consumers in an attempt to understand if, when, and how the former may facilitate the latter in the marketplace.

Briefly, we propose that when a company wrongs a consumer (i.e., treats him or her immorally), this consumer’s moral balance (sense of equity) is disturbed by company actions. As the result, the consumer not only feels moral anger, but also their own moral standards shift at least temporarily (i.e., moral malleability). Specifically, this moral malleability changes wronged consumer’s sense of a “true north” in terms of morality assessments, rendering a relaxing of moral standards (following an immoral action on the part of the firm) and an increased likelihood to engage in more immoral consumer responses. Therefore, firm immorality triggers moral anger and leads consumers to “morality matching” by responding in kind with deviant behaviors that appear to match in immorality.

We test our theoretical framework in a series of four studies encompassing tightly controlled manipulated company wrongdoing at different levels of immorality, actual past company wrongdoing, and real-time company wrongdoing experienced by participants. The studies include a wide range of company acts of wrongdoing and consumer responses, both deviant and not. Study 1 directly manipulating both the level of immorality of the company wrongdoing as well as that of the consumers’ response. Here we focus on the consumers’ perceived match between the two parties’ actions in order to examine the moral malleability and morality matching accounts. Then, in studies 2a and 2b, consumers recalled their own recent examples of service failure that were perceived to be either simply dissatisfying or as immoral wrongdoing. In study 2a, we directly capture moral malleability as expressed by moral evaluations of a deviant behavior. Study 2b adds to our understanding by examining a range of potential consumer responses. Finally, in study 3, participants experienced an actual wrongdoing and we assessed their actual lying/cheating behavior in order to provide real-world evidence of morality matching.

We bring together components from several different research streams and theoretical perspectives within the present research, including moral judgment theory, consumer deviance, service failures and company responses to failures, as well as consumer emotional reactions to the latter. Contributing to theory, this research is the first known attempt to apply and extend moral psychology theory (Haidt 2001, 2007) in the context of consumer behavior, and deviant consumer behavior in particular. Specifically, this work investigates the processes underlying consumer decisions to engage in deviant acts targeting companies. We also add to prior literature on moral malleability by examining how the external factor of firm behavior can activate the moral regulation system and lead consumers to reinterpret the morality of certain marketplace behaviors (Ayal and Gino 2011; Bandura 1991; Mazar et al. 2008; Monin and Jordan 2009). In addition, we introduce the concept of “morality matching” and demonstrate how this process works within the context of company wrongdoing and consumer responses. Importantly, we also provide insights on the boundaries of moral malleability and morality matching in response to company wrongdoing, as we identify when and to what extent moral anger (as opposed to mere dissatisfaction) follows company wrongdoing.

Companies make mistakes. They do not always respond appropriately to these mistakes, thereby raising concerns of immoral behavior by their customers. We identify an increased propensity for consumers to temporarily adjust their own moral standards as part of a morality matching process following firm wrongdoing. When company actions call into question moral standards, consumers appear ready to flex their own in order to engage in deviant behaviors that they would otherwise avoid. As such, immoral deviance has consequences for all.

REFERENCES


