Global Character and Motivated Moral Decoupling Among Liberals and Conservatives

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Though ideology affects judgments of immorality differently across violations, we find consistently greater moral decoupling among liberals after various sorts of public scandals. Those with a liberal ideology are more likely to selectively separate immoral actions from evaluations of professional performance. Conservative values emphasize global character, driving this disparity.

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The Value of Consumer Values: Explaining Value-Motivated Cognition and Behavior
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Paper #1: How Beauty Work Affects Judgments of Moral Character
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Paper #2: Cultural Diversity in Advertising and Representing Different Visions of America
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Paper #3: Global Character and Motivated Moral Decoupling Among Liberals and Conservatives
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Paper #4: Introducing the Implication Model of the Motivated Cognition
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SESSION OVERVIEW
Values matter. Value conflicts trigger international wars and shape political discourse. In hopes to strategically use values’ powers, firms craft value statements and design value-laden advertisements to attract employees and brands. For instance, Coca Cola’s 2014 Super Bowl commercial sought to bridge the gap between the values of diversity and patriotism. Additionally, Dove’s continuing #RealBeauty and #RealStrength campaigns aim to update traditional values to include inclusiveness and authenticity. However, though policymakers, practitioners, and researchers across disciplines know the motivating power of values, more work is needed to achieve a nuanced and comprehensive understanding, and to thus ultimately effectively wield the value of consumers’ values.

Currently, consumer research has only begun to connect with perspectives from neighboring disciplines that highlight values and ideologies, and integrative models unifying findings on value-motivated cognition remain scare and nascent. Besides deepening our understanding of fundamental political values and certain under-researched values related to essential character and true self, this work can help illuminate how and when values lead to attitude change versus steadfast denial, and thus help marketers navigate value conflicts from political macro pro-social issues to personal choices on the beauty isle. This session seeks to advance connections with these outside perspectives, build an integrative theoretical foundation around values, and broaden the scope of consumer research within this key area.

The first two papers examine how values shape consumers’ judgments of individuals and firms. Yang and colleagues reveal how greater effort in enhancing one’s appearance threatens values about truthfully representing one’s essential self. Shepard and colleagues find that diversity appeals, such as the 2014 Coca Cola ad, may have polarizing effects based on consumers’ values, provoking negative reactions from those who ideologically support the current American system. Both papers demonstrate the malleability of these effects, developing message framings that affirm these values and minimize threats.

The final two papers provide perspective on how and when values lead to motivational biases in cognition. Bhattacharjee and colleagues show that due to differences in values emphasizing essential character, conservatives selectively separate immoral behaviors from professional performance less than liberals, providing one of the first demonstrations that conservative ideology can in some circumstances reduce motivated reasoning. Finally, Campbell and Kay present a parsimonious model to unify ideas from the recent explosion of research on value-based motivated cognition across fields. This integrative model provides insight into the often hidden source of motivated cognitions, the multiple paths they often take, and how to reduce these biases.

Together, these papers explore novel territory, lay a theoretical foundation in an underexplored, growing area, and stimulate deeper questions. Namely, which sorts of values are most susceptible to threat, and which tend to motivate moderation rather than polarization? When and how can values conflicts be resolved and thus reduce interpersonal conflict? Given the fundamental role values play in our lives, we expect this session to interest researchers of value and preference, motivated reasoning, culture, identity, and moral and social judgment. We hope this audience can help us ponder these questions, engage in a fruitful dialogue, further advance connections, and collectively broaden our perspectives.

How Beauty Work Affects Judgments of Moral Character

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS
Consumers devote countless hours and billions of dollars on appearance and beauty practices (i.e., beauty work, Kwan and Trautner 2009) because physical attractiveness leads to numerous positive outcomes (Langlois et al. 2000). However, an odd paradox exists: attractive people are generally perceived more favorably, but people who put a lot of effort in pursuing attractiveness are generally viewed negatively.

We propose that this occurs because an individual’s appearance holds symbolic, informative value in person perception. Attractiveness is perceived as a reliable indicator of fitness, health, and reproductive value, which is largely predetermined genetically (Langlois et al. 2000). Furthermore, people tend to use attractiveness as a global, general indicator of how good or bad an individual’s “true nature” is – something people are born with that they cannot change (Dion et al. 1972). Thus, by engaging in high levels of effort to upgrade or change one’s appearance, one may also be perceived as masking who they truly are. We posit that extensive beauty work is perceived as indicative of poor moral character because such effort implies that one is misrepresenting one’s “true essence” in order to acquire undeserved benefits. We test this effect and downstream consequences across 4 studies, focusing on the beauty work of women since they face the greatest pressure to conform to beauty standards (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997).

In study 1, we show that effort in beauty work influences judgments of moral character and perceived effectiveness in various roles. Female undergraduates were told that “Jenna” spent either 10 minutes or 2 hours getting ready to go out for an evening. When Jenna spent 2 hours getting ready, participants expected her not only to have poor moral character (moral, ethical, r=.70), but also to be a worse student, friend, sister, daughter, athlete and artist (all p’s <
Ratings of moral character also mediated the effect of effort on participants’ judgment of Jenna, consistent with prior research finding that judgments of moral character are perceived as relevant to various domains (Blasi 2005).

In study 2, we show that the effort-morality link is unique to the beauty domain. Female undergraduates (N=101) read that Jenna put high or low effort into her beauty or academic work. A 2(effort: low vs. high) x 2(domain: beauty vs. academic) ANOVA revealed a two-way interaction (p<.01) where Jenna was rated as having poorer moral character (moral, ethical, genuine, sincere, α=.88; Walker and Hennig 2004) when she exerted high relative to low effort on beauty work (M<sub>high</sub>=4.11 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=4.70, p<.05) but not on academic effort (M<sub>high</sub>=4.90 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=4.61, ns). Given that individuals also serve to gain personally with academic success, the null effect in the academic domain rules out the possibility that negative perceptions of high effort for personal gain drove our effects.

In study 3, we examine the underlying mechanism, testing whether perceptions of misrepresenting oneself drive our effects on judgments of moral character. We also examined whether this effort-morality link exists in consumers’ expectations for how they themselves would be perceived by others. Female undergraduates (N=92) were told that they heard that a new friend spent 10 minutes or 2 hours getting ready (third person) or that a new friend learned the same information about them (first person). We measured moral character (same items as in S2, α=.90) and misrepresentation with two items (e.g., “to what extent would you believe that she is trying to put forth an image of someone she is not, r=−.83). A 2(effort: high vs. low) x 2(perspective: third vs. first) ANOVA found only a main effect of effort on both ratings of moral character (p<.01) and perceptions of misrepresentation (p<.01). High effort garnered more negative ratings of moral character in both the third person (M<sub>high</sub>=4.19 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=5.30, p<.01) and first person condition (M<sub>high</sub>=3.73 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=5.18, p<.01). High effort also led to higher ratings of misrepresentation in both the third (M<sub>high</sub>=4.17 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=2.09, p<.01) and first person condition (M<sub>high</sub>=4.55 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=2.06, p<.01).

A bootstrapping moderated mediation analysis revealed misrepresentation mediated the effect of effort on moral character ratings in both the third (95% CI: -.94, -.22) and first person conditions (95% CI: -.10, -.34). Thus, these negative perceptions of high effort hold regardless of whether one is evaluating others or anticipating being evaluated by others.

In study 4, we use an advertising context to identify a boundary condition for our effects. We posit that extensive beauty work signals poor moral character because such behavior is perceived as misrepresenting one’s “true essence.” This suggests that if we can reframe the meaning of beauty work from reflecting one’s true self to reflecting one’s desire to enhance one’s best qualities that one already possesses, the effect of effort should be mitigated. To test this prediction, female Mturk participants (N=140) were presented with an ad for “PerfectSkin” foundation that required high or low effort to use and emphasized that the product would allow their “true self” or “best self” to shine through.

A 2(effort: high vs. low) x 2(message: true self vs. best self) ANOVA found two-way interactions on both ratings of one’s moral character (same items as prior studies, α=.90, p<.05), and willingness to purchase PerfectSkin (p<.05). Participants felt that purchasing PerfectSkin would hurt their moral character more when the product required high relative to low effort, but only in the “true self” (M<sub>high</sub>=3.23 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=4.22, p<.01) and not the “best self” condition (M<sub>high</sub>=3.60 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=3.71, ns). Similarly, effort influenced participants’ willingness to purchase PerfectSkin in the “true self” (M<sub>high</sub>=4.19 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=5.28, p<.05) but not “best self” condition (M<sub>high</sub>=4.57 vs. M<sub>low</sub>=4.52, ns). Further analysis confirmed that ratings of moral character mediated the effect of effort on purchase interest but only in the “true self” (95% CI: -.01, -.26) and not the “best self” condition (95% CI: -.37, -.55).

Taken together, our studies provide support for the notion that high effort spent in enhancing one’s attractiveness is indicative of poor moral character because such beauty work implies that one is misrepresenting oneself and preventing others from accurately judging one’s “true essence.”

Cultural Diversity in Advertising and Representing Different Visions of America

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

It is important for brands to reflect the growing diversity of America in their advertising, particularly brands that reflect American culture and values. Despite this, little research has sought to understand how consumers respond to diversity in advertising. Past work has investigated how ethnic minorities respond to ads depicting individuals from their cultural group (Brumbaugh and Grier 2006; Lee, Fernandez, and Martin 2002; Ueltschy 2001). However, ads depicting cultural diversity also have the potential to reflect American society and how different cultures view America, and so consumers may respond to these ads differently depending on their views of America in general.

System justification theory (Jost & Banaji 1994) posits that there are individual differences in how satisfied one is with the current state of society and the values that it stands for. Those who are high in system confidence are satisfied with their society and its dominant ideology, whereas those low in system confidence are less supportive of their society and the values it represents. Higher system confidence predicts a preference for brands that show explicit support for one’s social system (Banfield et al 2011; Cutright et al. 2011) and brands that reflect the values of the society’s dominant ideology (Shepherd, Chartrand, and Fitzsimons 2015).

Hypotheses

Cultural diversity in advertising has the potential to reflect American society and embody a view of America that is either consistent or inconsistent with a consumer’s beliefs and values. One way to interpret diversity in an ad is that minorities are changing America, which those high in system confidence should respond negatively to (H1). However, cultural diversity in ads may also communicate the idea that different cultures love America and American brands (e.g., Coca-Cola’s “America the Beautiful” ad from the 2014 Super Bowl). Ads with culturally affirming messages such as this should be particularly appealing to consumers high in system confidence, who have favorable impressions of America and its global power and influence (H2). Finally, depicting cultural diversity in ads in the service of selling American brands to foreign countries and exporting American values should also be appealing to those high in system confidence (vs. those low in system confidence, or when the ads are for a domestic audience).

Research

In Study 1, 180 American participants first rated their level of confidence in their social system using the system justification scale (Kay and Jost 2003). They then viewed a series of ads created by the researchers (matched as closely as possible) which depicted either white and/or heterosexual actors vs. non-white or homosexual actors (i.e., cultural diversity). We found that those who were higher in system confidence (i.e., those who subscribe to America’s dominant
ideology and its values) liked ads that contained cultural diversity less than the ads that did not (H1). This was in part due to their perception that minorities threaten traditional American values. The reverse was found for those lower in system confidence.

In Study 2, 200 American participants were then randomly assigned to either a baseline “no ad” condition, or our experimental condition where they viewed Coca-Cola’s “America the Beautiful” ad from the 2014 Super Bowl, depicting people from various cultures singing “America the Beautiful” in different languages (“ad condition”). The study was run shortly after the commercial aired. Participants then rated their attitude toward Coca-Cola (reflects ideal values, ethical, likeable; α = .90). We predicted that those high in system confidence would rate Coca-Cola more favorably in the ad condition because it affirms their view of America and depicts the world as loving America (H2). First those high in system confidence rated Coca-Cola more favorably in the ad condition compared to the no ad condition, and compared to those lower in system confidence. Second, Study 3 (n = 152) presented participants the same ad, and found that those higher in system confidence were more likely to perceive the ad as affirming America’s greatness and that world loves America, which in turn predicted their more favorable evaluations of the brand. Thus, Studies 2 and 3 in combination provide support for H2.

Another way that cultural diversity in ads may affirm America and its values is when the ad is for a foreign (as opposed to domestic) market, thus exporting American culture and exposing the rest of the world to American brands. This should be particularly appealing to those high in system confidence (H3). We explore this in Study 4 (n = 186) by measuring system confidence and then presenting participants with ads that cater to different ethnic/cultural groups. Critically, the ads were presented as being for an American audience (“domestic” condition) or for a foreign audience (“foreign” condition). Consistent with H3, those higher in system confidence significantly preferred the ads in the foreign condition vs. the domestic condition. No such effect was found among those low in system confidence.

In short, cultural diversity in advertising has the potential to reflect a view of America that is either desirable, or undesirable to consumers, depending on how those consumers view America in general. We find that those who are satisfied and confident in America respond negatively to cultural diversity in ads, but respond positively to ads with cultural diversity content when the ad suggests that (i) the world loves America, or (ii) when diversity is in the service of exporting American culture and brands to other countries. Implications are discussed.

Global Character and Motivated Moral Decoupling Among Liberals and Conservatives

EXTENDED ABSTRACTS

From preferences for public policies to personal consumption decisions, political ideology is a pervasive influence on individual behavior (Khan Misra & Singh 2013).

Political issues are deeply enmeshed with powerful motivational forces like individual identity, morality, and values (Haidt 2012). Motivational biases are thus essential to understanding how consumers process information related to moral or political issues (Ditto, Pizarro and Tannenbaum 2009; Kahan et al. 2012). An influential stream of prior research suggests that political conservatism is associated with greater motivated reasoning in general (Eidelman 2012; Jost et al. 2003). Nevertheless, it may be important to investigate reasoning in specific contexts.

The current research examines how ideology affects the prevalence of consumer reasoning processes that often arise in the wake of public scandals. From Chris Christie to Brian Williams, the list of scandals involving public figures is varied and continually growing. Recent research finds that such situations can lead motivated consumers to engage in moral decoupling, a reasoning process by which they selectively dissociate immoral actions from judgments of professional performance (Bhattacharjee, Berman and Reed 2013).

We investigate ideological differences and motivational biases in how people judge the professional relevance of immoral personal behaviors by public figures. Three studies show that political liberalism is associated with greater moral decoupling, an effect rooted in conservatives’ greater belief that global character drives behavior across contexts. We also find clear evidence of motivational bias across the political spectrum in these judgments, and this evidence appears more robust among liberal responders.

Study 1 examined the association between political ideology and general beliefs about the professional relevance of personal morality. On three items assessing beliefs about moral decoupling (e.g., “Judgments of job performance should remain separate from judgments of morality.”), agreement declined with individual political conservatism (r(207) = -.14, p = .008). This association held in regressions controlling for demographic factors such as age, gender, and education.

To examine more contextualized judgments in Study 2, we presented a scenario (described as an excerpt from a news article) about a Democrat versus Republican governor. The article reported that the governor had been popular and effective in office, but recently admitted to either having an ongoing extramarital affair with a campaign worker or implementing legislation that increased profits for companies in which he was invested. As a proxy for ideology and a means of manipulating motivation, we recruited registered Democrat and Republican voters. Results revealed a main effect of participants’ party affiliation on judgments of professional relevance: Democrats were more likely than Republicans to decouple both types of immoral acts from performance (F(1,1012) = 37.41, p < .001). A two-way interaction between participant and governor party affiliation indicated motivational bias in decoupling judgments: participants from both parties advocated separating immorality from performance more strongly when the governor’s affiliation matched their own (F(1,1012) = 35.09, p < .001). In these scenarios, Democrat voters exhibited significantly greater motivational bias than Republicans (F(1,1012) = 4.61, p = .032).

These results persisted when controlling for participants’ judgments of the immorality of the governor’s actions. Hence, these patterns do not seem to be driven solely by ideological variation in caring about moral violations, and judgments of professional relevance and immorality appear to be distinct. Our third study assessed this possibility more carefully and examined what drives these effects.

Prior research demonstrates that liberals tend to care relatively more about moral violations related to harm and fairness, while conservatives tend to care relatively more about violations related to ingroup loyalty, authority, and purity (Graham, Haidt and Nosek 2009). Accordingly, in Study 3 we examined violations pretested to relate to each moral foundation: harm (abusing pets, harassing overweight people), fairness (rigging art competitions, discriminating against minorities), ingroup loyalty (divulging friends’ secrets, disowning family members), authority (disrespecting parents, disrupting political ceremony), and purity (drinking urine in a performance art piece, eating a dog that died naturally). To investigate ideological variation in moral decoupling outside the political domain, we
examined how Democrat and Republican voters responded to these personal transgressions being committed by a high school principal. As before, Democrat voters decoupled these immoral acts from professional performance more readily than Republicans ($F(1,530)=29.43$, $p<.001$). This effect was directionally consistent within each moral foundation, with no two-way interaction. On the contrary, party affiliation had only a marginal main effect on judgments of immorality and interacted significantly with moral foundation ($F(4,530)=5.96$, $p<.001$). Across the three moral foundations associated with conservatism (ingroup, authority, purity), Democrats both judged violations as less severe ($M=5.34$ vs. $6.30$, $p<.001$) and decoupled them more readily from performance ($M=6.09$ vs. $4.91$, $p<.001$). More notably, even on the two foundations associated with liberalism (harm, fairness), for which Democrats judged violations as more severe ($M=7.07$ vs. $6.48$, $p=.037$), they exhibited greater moral decoupling than Republicans ($M=5.08$ vs. $4.49$, $p=.035$). Mediation analyses found that the effects of political ideology on the extent of moral decoupling were mediated by individual belief in global character (indirect effect $=-0.029$, SE $=.013$, 95% CI $[-0.060,-0.008]$). There were no indirect effects related to the importance of role models, moral rationalization of violations, judgments of immorality, or judgments of moral character.

While ideology affects judgments of immorality inconsistently across different sorts of violations, we find consistently greater moral decoupling among liberals compared to conservatives in both political and apolitical contexts. Our findings suggest that conservatism may not always translate to greater motivated reasoning. Emphasizing essential global character may increase motivational biases in inferential contexts. Particularly, we see affirmation as a force that can manage people’s sensitivity to implied conclusions of facts.

To illustrate, consider further the case of climate change where the dominant narrative chain is that 1) the fact: dangerous climate change exists 2) which implies 3) the conclusion: danger and enacting liberal policies to fight the danger. Here the implied conclusion may motivate certain individuals to deny the fact more. In this conservatives may deny the fact more because the solutions are particularly antithetical and threatening to their values. Note that a simple model of motivated cognition would only focus on the aspects of climate facts (e.g., the dangerous weather consequence). Such a “fact only model” would not predict differential motivations for conservatives and liberals. However, the IMMC does predict such and these predictions are support by recently published experiments from our lab (Campbell & Kay, 2014).

Next, we explain published and unpublished findings from our lab and other labs, to illustrate contribution of the IMMC framework.

**Solution Aversion**

As shown above in the climate change and similar climate change experiment conducted outside our lab (Feygina et al., 2010), the IMMC predicts that the associated solutions to problems can motivate denial of fact beyond the severity of the problem, in a sub pattern of the IMMC we call “solution aversion” (Campbell & Kay, 2014). Conceptually related, Ditto and Liu (2013) experimentally find people deny the factual efficacy of capital punishment, the more they see execution as deontologically aversive. Problem Exaggeration

The IMMC also predicts that especially desirable solutions may lead to exaggeration of problems. In a series of recent unpublished experiments conducted on Reddit.com, we find evidence of this prediction, such that when a problem (e.g. the common cold) is said to be in part solved by one’s important beliefs (e.g. using one’s personal scientific discipline) versus a neutral set of beliefs (e.g. another scientific discipline), people exaggerate the severity of the problem. Here, the exaggeration of the fact implies a more self-aggrandizing conclusion that one’s important beliefs (values, skills, and group) are important and this accordingly motivates exaggeration.

**Denial of Implication**

Past work has found people will accept facts they are strongly motivated to deny when factual evidence is strong. However, we argue such “de-biasing” is not always a great cause for celebration. This is because though people may accept the fact, they may deny the implication, e.g. denying stage two in the case of a narrative we experimentally examined 1) fact: gay parents can be just as good parents, 2) this implies, 3) the conclusion: gay marriage should be legal. In a recent set of published (Friesen, Campbell, & Kay 2015) and a new line of unpublished experiments, we find people motivated to maintain certain beliefs from God to politics to consumer electronics, take a “flight from fact” and transform their beliefs to be more unfalsifiable when potentially falsifying facts seem more likely to endanger the narrative belief chain.

**Accepting Conclusions**

For completeness, we present another untested prediction of the IMMC: people will be more likely to accept the logical validity of a belief narrative with an undesirable conclusion, if they feel it lacks factual validity (e.g. accepting the idea that climate change would imply government policies, but believe the evidence does not support the fact climate change exists).

The IMMC’s Future – Advancing Connections With Affirmation

Affirmation (Sherman & Cohen 2006) research has received a high level of attention in the psychology literature but less attention so in the consumer literature, especially when considering practical consumer applications. Particularly, we see affirmation as a force that can manage people’s sensitivity to implied conclusions of facts.
For instance, those wishing to persuade system justifiers that America needs to be more environmental and motivated, may find success when they also emphasize that America is already quite environmental or generally a fine country, a different strategy that derogates America may work better for anti system Americans.

In sum, we encourage researchers and practitioners to be more aware of the implications of their communications and present the IMMC as a parsimonious but rich and ubiquitous model to help predict, understand, and alter motivated interpretation of fact-implication-conclusion narrative belief chains.

REFERENCES


