Morality-Based Blame For Victims of Harmful Product Failures
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Three studies show that consumers (especially those with strong beliefs in a just world) are more likely to blame immoral (vs. neutral or moral) victims of harmful product failures, and that victim blame reduces company blame, influencing choice and stunting market self-regulation. We also explore the moderating role of negligence.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Imagine an automobile accident resulting from faulty brakes. To what extent would the driver be blamed if he was driving to meet his mistress rather than his wife? The objective reason for the accident in both cases is brake failure, yet the moral nature of the driver’s behavior is likely to color our assessment of blame to either the victim or company. Blame is an impediment to social change (Ryan 1976) because it stunts market forces that would otherwise punish the company’s bad behavior, thus threatening market self-regulation. Victim blame is therefore an important topic that has received little empirical attention in the consumer behavior literature.

Alicke’s (2000) theory of culpable control posits that following a harmful event, people automatically assess blame based partly on character evaluations. We propose that product failures harming an immoral (vs. neutral or moral) victim will produce (H1a) more victim blame and (H1b) less company blame. Further, due to its role in predicting victim derogation (Kogut 2011; Lerner and Simmons 1966), we propose that Belief in a Just World (BJW; Lerner 1980) will potentiate the enhanced blame for the immoral (vs. neutral or moral) victim (H2). We also propose that the morality × BJW interaction will reduce company blame, mediated by victim blame (H3).

STUDY 1
We recruited 182 attentive participants from MTurk (M_Age = 35.87, SD_Age = 11.87; 51.1% female). Half the sample began with Lipkus’ (1991) seven-item BJW scale (α = .903), whereas the other half ended with this scale. Because BJW scale order influenced victim and company blame (both ps < .001), we retained it as a dichotomous covariate in all studies. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two scenarios about a person named Mark in a 2-cell (morality: immoral vs. neutral) between-participants design. In the (immoral) [neutral] scenario, Mark’s brakes failed and he crashed into a tree while driving to see his (mistress) [wife]. Participants then responded to two attention checks, a three-item manipulation check of immorality perceptions (α = .946), and three-item scales for each of victim blame (α = .879) and company blame (α = .931).

Independent samples t-tests showed that perceptions of immorality and victim blame were higher and company blame was lower in the immoral (vs. neutral) condition (all ps < .013), supporting H1. Moderated mediation analysis (PROCESS model 7; Hayes, 2013) supported H2 and H3, such that the morality × BJW interaction increased victim blame which in turn decreased company blame (index = -.265, SE = .151, 95% CI [-.586, -.001]). Though Study 1 provides initial support for our hypotheses, it is not yet clear whether a moral victim will be blamed less than a morally neutral one, or if victim blaming will influence choice of real brands.

STUDY 2
We recruited 278 attentive participants from MTurk (M_Age = 34.74, SD_Age = 10.79; 54.3% female), all of whom indicated at least moderate liking for Chipotle, the brand used in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of three stories – ostensibly reported by other respondents – about a coworker named Darren, in a 3-cell (morality: immoral vs. neutral vs. moral) between-participants design. The (immoral) [neutral] story described Darren as (lazy, rude, and unpleasant) [hardworking, kind, and fun]; Darren’s character was not described in the neutral story. All stories explained that Darren got food poisoning from Chipotle. We used similar measures of BJW (α = .892), manipulation check (α = .886), victim blame (α = .852), and company blame (α = .790). We also offered participants an actual choice between a $10 gift card to either Subway or Chipotle.

A one-way MANOVA with Bonferroni-corrected contrasts showed that Darren (the victim) was perceived as more immoral in the immoral (vs. neutral) condition (p < .001), and more immoral in the neutral (vs. moral) condition (p < .001). Supporting H1a, Darren was blamed more in the immoral (vs. neutral or moral) condition (both ps < .001), but blamed equally in the neutral and moral conditions (p > .999). We dummy-coded morality into dummy1 (0 = neutral; 1 = immoral) and dummy2 (0 = moral; 1 = immoral), and used PROCESS (model 7) to test moderated mediation (X = dummy1, M = victim blame, W = BJW, Y = company blame), showing good fit (index = -.185, SE = .113, 95% CI [-.484, -.018]) and supporting H2 and H3. Based on this model, we used SEM to examine choice as an outcome of company blame, which exhibited excellent fit (χ²(10) = 8.569, p = .573, CFI > .999, RMSEA < .001, PCLOSE = .836). Similar results emerged using dummy2 in PROCESS and SEM. Study 2 replicated and extended Study 1, but did not distinguish between moral and neutral victims. Based on Nadler (2012), we expected negligence to moderate the effect of morality, such that a moral (vs. neutral) victim will be blamed less only when he is not negligent (H4).

STUDY 3
We recruited 269 attentive participants from MTurk (M_Age = 35.52, SD_Age = 11.92; 49.1% female). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (morality: moral vs. neutral) × 2 (negligence: yes vs. no) between-participants design. As in Study 2, stimuli were based on a story about Darren, with a similar manipulation of morality. The (negligent) [not negligent] stories explained that Darren was at a bar with his phone on the counter, and (Darren’s phone was gone when he returned from the bathroom) [a thief grabbed Darren’s phone and ran while Darren was there]. Darren later discovered that his private information was stolen, even though the mobile provider guaranteed identity-theft protection. We used similar measures of BJW (α = .919), morality manipulation check (α = .830), victim blame (α = .905), and company blame (α = .786), as well as a three-item negligence manipulation check (α = .954).

A 2 × 2 MANOVA showed that participants in the moral (vs. neutral) conditions perceived the victim as less immoral (p < .001), and participants in the negligent (vs. not negligent) conditions perceived the victim as more negligent (p < .001). Supporting H4, we observed a morality × negligence interaction on victim blame (p < .001), such that participants blamed the moral (vs. neutral) victim less when he was not negligent (p < .001), but not when he was negligent (p = .143). PROCESS (model 7) showed that the morality × negligence interaction reduced company blame, mediated by victim blame (index = -.295, SE = .154, 95% CI [-.683, -.058]). Thus, consumers only blamed the moral (vs. neutral) victim less when they are explicitly told that the victim was not negligent.

REFERENCES


