Seeking Justice: How Harmful Brands Cause Consumers to Punish, Cheat, and Steal

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We examine how and why consumers engage in retributinal acts directed towards brands that are perceived as harmful. Consumers are shown to lie, cheat, and steal as they attribute lower moral worth to harmful brands and this effect is shown to persist in the absence of any attributable brand transgression.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/102298/volumes/v44/NA-44

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In July of 2015, a group known as The Impact Team hacked into Avid Life Media (AshleyMadison.com, EstablishedMen.com) and then released the names of 37 million users (Watson 2015). While this event caused a whirlwind of media attention, the marketing literature is relatively silent on what might motivate these types of attacks. Why would individuals spend their time, demand no financial incentive, and risk severe imprisonment to attack a company that had not personally wronged them?

Extant research has argued that unethical consumer behavior is a function of two competing motivations: self-interest versus protection of one’s positive self-concept (Mazar, Amir, and Ariely 2008). However, a distinct mechanism that has received less attention within the marketing literature is that of moral justification. Unlike the research that has stressed the absence of moral considerations, the current research focuses on moral justification which implies that consumers are acting on a moral imperative in which targets are perceived to be deserving negative treatment (Bandura 1999) – an effect that we argue can impact a brand regardless of any directly attributable personal transgression. There may be no moral intuition more fundamental than the rejection of unwarranted harm and the subsequent need for justified punishment (Greene 2012; Khamitov, Rotman, and Piazza 2016). When entities are perceived as harmful, an individual comes to believe that they possess lower moral worth and subsequently are deserving of moral mistreatment.

Across six studies the current research examines consumers’ punishment of brands that they perceive to be harmful. We argue that consumers perceive these brands as being of lower moral worth, and therefore less deserving of fair and ethical treatment. As such, consumers are more willing to lie, cheat, and steal to punish a harmful brand – regardless of whether the brand’s harmfulness stems from direct, personal transgressions or a more general harmful reputation.

Study 1 establishes that perceptions of harmlessness predict unethical retribution in the form of real-world theft and fraud across a variety of industries. Results demonstrate that perception of harmlessness was a significant positive predictor of retail fraud ($r = .086, p < .05$) and that the effect held while controlling for perceived size, profitability, ease and riskiness of committing fraud.

Study 2 examines the underlying psychological mechanism and shows that perceptions of a brand’s harmlessness translates into increased punishment through lower moral worth. We held the brand constant (Nike) and asked participants about their perceptions of its harmlessness, moral worth, as well as punishment and marketplace aggression (adapted from Grégoire, Laufer, and Tripp 2010). Participants then completed measures of brand attitudes, likeability, and were asked to report whether they could recall Nike having committed any specific transgression towards them personally. Results demonstrate that perceptions of harmlessness predicted both punishment, $\beta = .46, p < .001$ and marketplace aggression, $\beta = .33, p < .01$ while controlling for brand attitudes, perceptions of the brand’s likeability, and experience of specific transgressions. Importantly, the influence of perceptions of harmlessness on both punishment and marketplace aggression scores was significantly mediated through moral worth attributions, $\beta = .05, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.00, .14]$ and $\beta = .08, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.04, .18]$.

Study 3 explores this effect by manipulating the level of perceived harmfulness in a more controlled setting using a fictitious brand. Participants were randomly assigned to either a more harmful or less harmful brand condition. The results again supported our moral worth mechanism. Specifically, in the more (vs. less) harmful condition, the brand was attributed lower moral worth, which in turn led to higher punishment intentions ($\beta = .24, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.02, .68]$) and marketplace aggression ($\beta = .17, 95\% \text{ CI} = [.02, .54]$).

Study 4 explores and extends this effect using a behavioral dependent measure of cheating, demonstrating that individuals are more likely to financially cheat harmful brands than less harmful brands. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (harmful brand with harmful policy; harmful brand with good policy; non-harmful brand; control). Participants in all four conditions were then asked to complete a matrix task (Mazar et al. 2008), and number of matrices solved was thus used as a proxy for our dependent measure of cheating behavior. Consistent with our predictions, there was a significant main effect of condition on the magnitude of cheating, $F(1,202) = 4.83, p = .003$. Specifically, participants in the control and non-harmful brand condition cheated less than both participants in the harmful brand with harmful policy condition and those in the harmful brand with good policy condition.

Study 5 manipulates the ethicality of consumers’ retributinal behavior to show that while individuals feel bad lying and cheating a non-harmful brand, they feel no worse off after cheating a harmful one. We randomly assigned participants to a 2 (harmful vs. non-harmful brand) x 2 (lying vs. not lying). The interaction was significant $F(1,166) = 5.86, p = .017$. Simple effects revealed that participants in the no harm condition felt significantly worse in the lying consumer action condition compared to the not lying condition. However, when the brand was manipulated to be harmful there was no statistically significant difference regardless of whether consumers lied or not.

Lastly, Study 6 identifies justice sensitivity as an important moderator of our effect and explores the concept of harmlessness contamination by demonstrating that the mere presence of a harmful product category can color a brand’s reputation as harmful. The interaction between the harmfulness of the product category and one’s justice sensitivity was significant for both punishment and aggression ($ps < .001$) and were mediated by perceptions of moral worth.

The results of six studies confirm our moral worth account of consumer punishment of harmful brands. We show that consumers view harmful brands as being less deserving of fair moral treatment leading to greater punishment intentions. Importantly, as our moral worth account would predict, a directly attributable personal transgression is not a necessary requirement to lead to the brand being perceived as deserving of lower moral worth and thus greater punishment.

REFERENCES


