A Regulatory Focus Approach to Consumers’ Moral Decision Making

Maria Schwabe, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany
David B. Dose, Aston Business School, UK
Gianfranco Walsh, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany

The authors examine how a consumer’s inherent or situationally induced regulatory focus influences whether he or she regulates or repeats moral consumption decisions. Findings indicate that balancing effects occur for consumers with a strong promotion focus while consistency is more pronounced for prevention-focused consumers.

[to cite]:  

[url]:  
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1023814/volumes/v45/NA-45

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/
A Regulatory Focus Approach to Consumers’ Moral Decision Making

Maria Schwabe, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany
David B. Dose, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany
Gianfranco Walsh, Friedrich-Schiller-University of Jena, Germany

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates that consumers’ regulatory focus influences moral self-regulating consumption. Promotion-focused consumers’ moral deeds provide them with a license for subsequent consumption behavior that is more immoral, and more immoral deeds can be cleansed by successively more moral consumption decisions. Prevention-focused consumers repeat their past moral consumption decisions, irrespective of the moral valence of previous decisions though. We further show that these effects are contingent on the domain congruency of the decisions and the efficiency of a more moral option.

Recent literature has shown that consumers’ moral decisions largely depend on their behavioral history, though research into how previous decisions influence consumers’ subsequent behavior in moral trade-off situations offers contradictory results: On the one hand, consumers might persist in their moral history, leading to consistent behavior (e.g., Gino, Norton, and Ariely 2010; Karmarkar and Bollinger 2015; Zhang et al. 2014). On the other hand, consumers may deviate from the moral stance reflected in their past decisions, such that they balance their moral and immoral deeds (Gneezy et al. 2012; Krishna 2011). Presented with these opposing theoretical viewpoints, more research is needed to determine when consumers are motivated to balance their consumption decisions and when they tend to be consistent (Mullen and Monin 2016). Drawing on regulatory focus theory, we demonstrate that consumers’ regulatory focus influences moral self-regulating consumption.

Study 1 was a 3 (first decision: moral vs. immoral vs. control) × 2 (regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion) between-subjects experiment with a sample of 188 students and university staff. Regulatory focus was manipulated by asking participants to write about their hopes/aspirations (promotion focus) or obligations/duties (prevention focus) (Freitas and Higgins 2002). To manipulate the morality of the first decision participants wrote about a situation where they helped someone unrewarded (moral) or were mean without any particular reason (immoral) (Conway and Peetz 2012). In all studies the control condition consisted of an unrelated scrambled sentence task. After the writing tasks, participants indicated their relative preference for organic versus conventional coffee which was the dependent measure. Interestingly, the results reveal that promotion-focused participants who had previously recalled moral decisions exhibited licensing behavioral patterns, indicating a lower subsequent preference for the organic coffee. Participants in the promotion focus condition who remembered past immoral decisions instead tried to “clean up” their behavior by preferring organic over conventional coffee. An induced prevention focus, however, causes consumers to repeat their past behavior which is consistent with past research (Zhang et al. 2014). Hence, participants with a prevention focus who recalled moral decisions preferred the organic coffee over the conventional alternative. If they confronted a prior immoral decision, prevention-focused participants indicated less preference for the organic coffee.

In study 2, we measured consumers’ chronic regulatory focus and manipulated the morality of the first decision, as well as the domain congruency of the first and second decisions, with a 2 (first decision: moral vs. immoral) × 2 (domain: same vs. different) between-subjects design and a morally neutral control group. The sample consisted of 291 students and university employees. For manipulating subsequent decisions of the same domain we first let participants choose from nine convenience goods (e.g., coffee, potato chips) that they would like to buy (Mazar and Zhong 2010). In the more moral condition, participants were shown seven green and two conventional convenience goods; in the more immoral condition, seven conventional and two green convenience goods appeared. Afterwards, they indicated their relative preference for organic versus conventional coffee as dependent measure. In the different domain condition, participants chose from a set of nine (moral: 7 green, 2 conventional; immoral: 7 conventional, 2 green) vouchers redeemable for green versus conventional clothes (e.g., T-shirts, jeans). The results indicate that promotion-focused participants show balancing patterns only for subsequent consumption situations in different behavioral domains. For subsequent decisions in the same behavioral domain they mimic their past decisions irrespective of the behavior’s moral stance. Prevention-focused consumers, however, show consistency in their consumption behavior in the same as well as in different consumption domains.

Study 3 manipulated the morality of the first decision, consumers’ regulatory focus, and the charity’s efficiency, using a 3 (first decision: moral vs. immoral vs. control) × 2 (regulatory focus: prevention vs. promotion) × 2 (charity efficiency: high vs. low) between-subjects design with 372 students and university employees as participants. The dependent variable was the choice in a moral trade-off, that is, the choice between keeping the reward in a customer referral program for themselves and donating the money to charity. Regulatory focus was manipulated as in study 1, while we used the scenario with nine different convenience goods from study 2 for manipulating the morality of the first decision. Charity efficiency was manipulated by indicating that the charity received a two-star (low efficiency) or four-star (high efficiency) rating by an independent institution (Winterich and Barone 2011). The results show that charity efficiency has no influence on the moral consumption behavior of promotion-focused participants. The authors presume that this is because promotion-focused consumers concentrate on the consequences of their behavior for their own moral self-perception, whereas the degree to which their moral decision benefits others may have relatively less importance. However, prevention-focused consumers refrain from mimicking the moral stance of their past behavior if the moral alternative is inefficient. Instead, they likely choose the more immoral option, irrespective of their behavior in subsequent situations. An inefficient moral choice option creates a situation in which the more moral alternative also is more risky, in that the donated money may not reach the intended recipient and thus would be lost. Hence, prevention-focused consumers may opt for the more immoral alternative, irrespective of their preceding decisions.

In sum, the findings show that a consumer’s inherent or situationally induced regulatory focus influences whether he or she regulates or repeats moral consumption decisions. These effects, however, are contingent on boundary conditions such as the domain congruency of the decisions studied and the efficiency of the more moral option. Thus, our research improves understanding regarding the dynamics of consumers’ moral self-regulation.
REFERENCES


