“I Am What You Eat”: Parents’ Morality Is Inferred From the Products They Choose For Their Children

Stefanie M. Tignor, Northeastern University, USA
Remi Trudel, Boston University, USA

Using attribution theory as a theoretical framework we develop a model of parental surrogate consumption. We demonstrate that perceptions of parents’ morality are influenced by the consumption choices they make for their children, and the strength of such moral attributions is dependent on perceptions of behavioral consistency and control.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

The current research utilizes and extends attribution theory (Heider 1958; Kelley 1967) to develop a model of “parental surrogate consumption,” or, purchasing products or services that one’s child will subsequently consume. Most broadly, we argue that parental surrogate consumption represents a moral consumption behavior, as such consumption stands to directly impact the health and well-being of another individual (i.e., the child) who does not possess regular or complete control over the goods or services he or she consumes (Vitell 2003). From this framework, we demonstrate that perceptions of parents’ morality are influenced by the consumption choices they make for their children, and show that the strength of such moral attributions is dependent on perceptions of behavioral consistency and control.

**Conceptual Background**

**Parental Surrogate Consumption**

Parents represent a sizeable market; in the United States alone 53 percent of consumers aged 18 to 40 report having at least one child (Newport and Wilke 2013). In the European Union, nearly 30 percent of all households contain at least one child (Eurostat 2016). These parents as a group spend billions annually on products and services for their children, from toys and sports leagues to food, clothing, and medical care (Lino 2014). Yet to date, consumer researchers have not examined the impact that routinely making such interdependent choices has on parental consumers. Rather, the bulk of existing research on parent-child consumption has focused on consumer socialization (e.g., John 1999) or children’s perceptions of products or advertising (e.g., Zhang and Sood 2002). Given the powerful role parents play in children’s consumption behavior, it is important for consumer researchers to examine how routinely making these interdependent choices impacts parental consumers. Importantly, the non-elective and power imbalanced nature of parental surrogate consumption distinguishes it from previously examined forms of marketplace surrogacy (Solomon 1986). Though parental surrogate consumption can take many forms, in the current research we examine the consumption of food products, and hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 1:** Consumers view parental surrogate consumption as a moral issue, and rate parents who choose healthy products for their children as more moral than parents who choose unhealthy products for their children.

**Attribution Theory**

When consumers make consumption decisions, they are conveying information about themselves to onlookers (Belk 1988). Attribution theory (Heider 1958; Jones and Davis 1965) examines how people utilize choice and behavioral information to form impressions of others’ character traits (i.e., form “internal” attributions; Weiner 1985).

**Consistency.** According to attribution theory, character attributions are formed when behaviors are perceived as being consistent with an individual’s typical pattern of behavior (Jones and Davis 1965). One particularly salient cue that consumers utilize to infer behavioral consistency with respect to food consumption is body weight; consumers typically infer that individuals who are overweight must consistently consume calorie-laden foods (Brownell 1991). In the current research we examine moral attributions formed based on single, one-time parental surrogate consumption behaviors, and manipulate perceptions of consistency using children’s physical characteristics.

**Hypothesis 2:** Consumers utilize children’s physical characteristics as a proxy for consistency information, and adjust their moral attributions accordingly.

**Control.** The second key determinant for forming character attributions is perceptions of control. According to attribution theory, character attributions are formed only when individuals are perceived to be making a volitional, intentional choice (Jones and Davis 1965). There exists a rich body of work examining how people form attributions of consumers based on their own consumption decisions (e.g., Vartanian, Herman, and Polivy 2007; Williams and Steffel 2014). Yet, to our knowledge, researchers have not yet examined whether attributions are similarly formed based on the products consumers select for others. Attribution theory would suggest that in such instances character attributions will be formed for the individual in control of the consumption decision (the parent), but will not be extended to the eventual consumer (the child). Furthermore, parents should be relieved of blame for any unhealthy consumption behaviors made by their children outside of their supervision.

**Hypothesis 3a:** Consumers do not form moral attributions of children based on parental surrogate consumption information, as they are not perceived as being in control of their consumption choices.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Consumers only form moral attributions of parents based on parental surrogate consumption information to the degree that parents are perceived as being in control.

**Experiment 1: Establishing Parental Surrogate Consumption as a Moral Consumption Behavior**

Experiment 1 aims to establish parental surrogate consumption as a moral consumption behavior by demonstrating that consumers form moral attributions of parents based on the food products they select for their children.

**Method**

Participants were 397 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Two healthy and two unhealthy food items were selected from a pool of ten pre-tested snacks: apples with peanut butter, yogurt and fruit, a slice of cake, and a donut. All participants were randomly assigned to view one of these snack choices, then asked to rate its unhealthiness using two 6-point bipolar scales: healthy/unhealthy and wholesome/unwholesome (α = .92).
After viewing each snack, participants were next presented with a hypothetical scenario stating the following: “8 year-old David has just gotten home from school, and it’s time for his after-school snack. David’s mother gives him…” followed by their assigned snack. Participants were next asked to make ratings of David’s mother’s morality, using four 6-point bipolar scales adapted from Steim and Nemeroff (1995): ethical/unethical, moral/immoral, kind-hearted/cruel, and caring/uncaring (α = .90), interspersed with four distractor scales.

Results and Discussion

Results of a one-way ANOVA confirmed a significant difference in morality ratings between conditions ($F(3,393)=64.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$). Mothers who fed “David” apple slices ($M=5.23$) and yogurt and fruit ($M=5.21$) were rated as the most moral; mothers who fed “David” a donut ($M=3.98$) and a slice of cake ($M=4.02$) were rated as less moral. Across conditions, participants’ perceptions of parents’ morality were negatively correlated with their perceptions of snack unhealthiness ($r(395) = -.60, p < .001$), providing support for H1.

Experiment 2: The Moderating Role of Children’s Appearance

Experiment 2 examined whether the strength of moral attributions, formed via parental surrogate consumption information, is moderated by children’s physical appearance.

Method

Participants were 314 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (child weight) x 2 (snack type) design. All participants in all conditions were presented with an image of “8-year old David.” In one condition David appeared to be of a healthy weight; in the second condition David was overweight. All participants read the same scenario presented in experiment 1, with either a donut or fruit with yogurt as the snack. After reading this scenario, participants were asked to make moral judgments of David’s mother (α = .92).

Results and Discussion

The joint impact of child weight and snack choice on perceptions of David’s mother was tested using a 2 x 2 ANOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect of child weight, such that participants perceived David’s mother to be less moral when her child was overweight ($F(1,310)=58.09, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$). The main effect of food choice was also significant ($F(1,310)=155.37, p < .001, \eta^2 = .33$), with David’s mother being perceived as more moral when she chose a healthy snack, once again confirming H1. The interaction of food choice and child weight was significant ($F(1,310)=12.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$), providing initial support for H2. Mothers who selected an unhealthy product for their child were punished more severely when that child was overweight.

Experiment 3: The Mediating Role of Consistency

This moderating role of child weight, as established in experiment 2, may be explained via the consistency dimension of attribution theory. When a mother selects an unhealthy product for her overweight child, consumers likely assume that such a choice is reflective of a consistent pattern of behavior. In experiment 3 we test this mechanism directly.

Method

Participants in experiment 3 were 405 adult Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions using the same 2 (child weight) x 2 (snack type) design and scenarios employed in experiment 2. After viewing “David” with his snack, participants were asked to rate the consistency with which they believed David’s mother selects that snack using five items (e.g., “David’s mother usually selects snacks like this for David to eat”; α = .94). Participants then provided moral judgments of David’s mother (α = .93).

Results and Discussion

Results were analyzed via moderated mediation analysis (Hayes 2013; PROCESS Model 58). The first model regressed child weight, snack choice, and the interaction between these two on perceptions of behavioral consistency, our mediator. The second model regressed child weight, perceptions of behavioral consistency, snack choice, and the interaction between snack choice and consistency on moral judgments. For full results and variable codings. Importantly, the conditional indirect effect of child weight on morality was significant for both the yogurt condition ($B=.54, 95\% CI = -.81 to -.31$) and the donut condition ($B=-.80, 95\% CI = -.10 to -.52$). Together, these results confirm H2 by identifying perceptions of behavioral consistency as the mediating mechanism between child weight and moral perceptions, for both healthy and unhealthy products.

Experiment 4: The Role of Perceived Control

In experiment 4 we incorporate perceived control into our model of parental surrogate consumption, by testing whether the choices that parents make impact the moral judgments formed of the children who are subjected to such choices.

Method

Participants in experiment 4 were 315 adult Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (child weight) x 2 (locus of control) design, nearly identical to that utilized in experiment 2. In contrast to prior experiments, participants were asked to make moral judgments of David himself (α = .90).

Results and Discussion

The joint impact of child weight and food choice on perceptions of David was tested using a 2 x 2 ANOVA. Results revealed a significant main effect of child weight, such that participants perceived overweight David to be less moral ($M=4.12$) than healthy weight David ($M=4.52; F(1,311)=16.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$). Importantly, the main effect of food choice failed to reach significance ($F(1,311)=2.68, p = .10, \eta^2 = .01$), confirming H3a. The interaction of food choice and child weight also failed to reach significance ($F(1,311)=.59, p = .44, \eta^p^2 = .00$). As David was not in control of his snack choice, consumers did not form character judgments of him based on his mother’s choices.

Experiment 5: The Joint Impact of Control and Consistency

In experiment 5 we investigate the joint impact of perceptions of control and consistency in forming moral attributions by manipulating control in our scenarios.

Method

Participants in experiment 5 were 468 adult Amazon Mechanical Turk workers. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions using a 2 (child weight) x 2 (locus of control) design. Participants were first shown overweight or healthy weight “David.” They were then presented with one of two scenarios, both of which resulted in David consuming a donut as his snack. In the “mother control condition,” the scenario was identical to that utilized in previous experiments.
In the “David control condition,” participants read the following: “David just got home from school and it’s time for his after school snack. David’s mother left him yogurt with fruit in the refrigerator to eat as a snack. David instead grabs a donut out of his backpack that he got from the school cafeteria, and eats that as his snack.” This scenario was selected from a pool of six scenarios, pre-tested for perceptions of control. Participants in all conditions rated the consistency with which they believed David to consume donuts ($\alpha = .92$). Finally, all participants were asked to make moral judgments of David’s mother ($\alpha = .89$).

**Results and Discussion**

We tested our hypotheses using a moderated mediation analysis (Hayes 2013; PROCESS Model 14). The first model regressed child weight on perceptions of behavioral consistency, our mediator. The second model regressed child weight, perceptions of behavioral consistency, locus of control, and the interaction between locus of control and consistency on moral judgments. For full results and variable codings.

The conditional indirect effect of child weight on judgments of mothers’ morality was significant for the mother control condition ($B = -.24$, $95\% CI = -.38$ to -.12), but not for the child control condition ($B = .06$, $95\% CI = .10$ to .21). These results support H3b by demonstrating that though a child’s weight provides observers with information regarding the consistency with which he consumes unhealthy products, the indirect effect of weight on moral judgments is only significant for mothers who possess control.

**General Discussion**

The current research extends attribution theory in establishing a model of parental surrogate consumption. Across five experiments, we: 1) define and characterize parental surrogate consumption as a moral consumption behavior, 2) demonstrate that just as moral attributions are formed based on personal consumption information, so too are they formed based on parental surrogate consumption information, and 3) demonstrate that the occurrence and strength of moral attributions is dictated by perceptions of behavioral consistency and control.

**Theoretical Implications**

This research contributes to the consumer behavior literature in a number of ways. First, we extend attribution theory beyond judgments made based on the choices consumers make for themselves (e.g., Olson et al. 2016; Williams and Steffel 2014). In this work, we demonstrate that such attributions also can be formed based on the choices consumers make for others (specifically, their children). Second, we direct attention to an overlooked yet highly impactful consumption context: consumption on the behalf of children. Though considerable research has been conducted on child-relevant phenomena such as consumer socialization (e.g., John 1999), the moral implications of the parental surrogate consumption process remain largely unexplored. Third, we answer the call to “broaden the scope” of consumer marketplace morality by introducing parental surrogate consumption as a moral marketplace behavior (Komarova Loureiro et al. 2016).

**Limitations and Future Research**

Though the current research is the first of its kind, it is not without limitations. Though we define parental surrogate consumption as pertaining to any number of products, herein we only investigate food choices. Future research should investigate non-food products such as screen time, educational products, and medical care, among others. Additionally, though we define parental surrogate consumption as pertaining to the parent-child relationship specifically, there exist many other under-studied surrogate consumption contexts characterized by an unequal distribution of power or control (e.g., consumption on the behalf of the elderly or disabled). Future research should examine these contexts in the interest of expanding our knowledge of surrogate consumption, as well as in the interest of addressing these under-served consumer populations (Pechmann et al. 2011).

**REFERENCES**


