Punishing Politeness: Moderating Role of Belief in Just World on Severity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Three studies demonstrate that politeness in advertising affect how consumers punish brands for unethical behavior. Those low in belief in just world (BJW) were more likely to punish a brand when more polite language was used. Both cynicism and trust mediated the effect of ethical practice on level of punishment.

Introduction
People are more likely to apply moral judgements to psychologically distant situations (Eyal et al. 2008). Psychological distance can be influenced through language. One aspect of language, politeness, has been shown to increase social distance between speakers (Brown and Levinson 1987; Holtgraves and Yang 1990; 1992). The purpose of this research is to understand the effect of politeness on moral judgements of the actions of brands.

We show that polite language in advertising can affect consumers’ intentions to punish a brand whose actions are ethically ambiguous. We explore the role of belief in a just world (BJW) when making such judgments. In addition, we also explore the underlying mechanism of trust and cynicism that drives punishment and moral perception of the brand.

Conceptual Development
Politeness
Formal titles, e.g. sir or Mister, are considered more polite than less formal terms of address, e.g. dude or mate (Ambady et al. 1996; Brown and Levinson 1987; Clark and Schunk 1980; Holtgraves and Yang 1990; 1992). Polite speech, however, increases the perception of social distance between speakers (Brown and Gilman 1989; Brown and Gilman 1960; Holtgraves and Yang 1990; 1992). Situational factors can also cause otherwise polite speech to be considered manipulative, sarcastic, or even offensive (Watts 2003).

The greater the psychological distance, the more abstract people’s thinking (Trope and Liberman 2010). More polite speech is associated with a higher level of psychological distance (Stephan et al. 2010). Judgements of morality are also associated with psychological distance. The greater the social distance between parties involved in a moral transgression, the more morally wrong an action is perceived (Eyal et al. 2008). It therefore follows that more polite speech, which increases social distance, should also increase the perception that a moral transgression is wrong.

Belief in a Just World
BJW is a belief that people get what they deserve (Lerner 1980). When encountering an injustice, BJW motivates us to punish a victimizer (Lerner 1980). Those high in BJW are more likely to punish those who violate social norms (Zhu et al. 2012). Those low in BJW perceive others as more motivated by self-interest, and that they believe that people often exploit others to their advantage (Lipkus 1992). BJW has also been shown to be related to psychological distance, such that as psychological distance increases, so too does BJW (Warner et al. 2012). As such, we believe that when more polite speech is used, social distance increases, so too does the need to restore justice.

Cynicism and Trust
Cynicism and trust are two important dimensions of moral judgement (Turner and Valentine 2001). The goals or values which motivate cynicism can be described by the belief that firms are disguising their own self-interest with altruism (Helm 2004; Odou and de Pecheyrou 2011). Cynical consumers seem to be motivated by a desire to punish companies whom they distrust (Helm 2004). Trust is the belief that the motives of others will be beneficial to one’s interests (Turner and Valentine 2001). Brand trust is the ability of a brand to elicit trust from consumers (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001). Trusting consumers seem to be motivated by a desire to reward trustworthy companies (Helm 2004).

Study 1
The objective of Study 1 was to evaluate whether consumers would penalize brands differently based on the politeness demonstrated in an advertisement by the brand.

Design and Participants
Participants (N = 124; 54.8% female; M age = 35.79) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions (politeness: control vs. less polite vs. more polite). Participants were asked to review an advertisement for a fictitious apparel brand called CJ. In the more polite condition, the tag line was the same as in the control condition followed by the word sir, and in the less polite condition, was followed by the word dude. Participants were then randomly presented with one of two press reports. They were that CJ was recently in the news and that a press report stated either: CJ purchases clothes from manufacturers that do not use child labor; however the manufacturers do not provide health care benefits to their employees (pretested M = 3.93, SD = 1.34) or that CJ uses low impact dyes, but the colors fade in clothing and are not durable (pretested M = 4.25, SD = 1.54). These two statements were not significantly different on ethical rating (p = .38).

Procedures and Measures
Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statement, “I feel that CJ did something morally wrong,” (anchored: 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; adapted from Cheng, Ottati, and Price, 2013). Then they were asked to, “Rate the degree of punishment for such behavior,” (anchored: 1 = lenient; 7 = severe; adapted from Cheng, Ottati, and Price 2013). Participants then completed the sixteen-item measure of BJW scale (and Peplau 1973).

Results
An ANCOVA was conducted with politeness in the advertisement and the composite score of BJW (α = .90) as predictors of punishment. There was a significant effect of politeness in advertising on severity of punishment (F(2, 118) = 3.42, p < .05, η2 = .055). There was also a significant effect of BJW on severity of punishment (F(1, 118) = 6.05, p < .05, η2 = .049). There was a significant interaction between politeness in the advertisement and the BJW (F(2, 118) = 3.09, p < .05, η2 = .05). A spotlight analysis revealed that when BJW was high, the punishment judgments did not vary significantly among the three advertisement conditions (p = .67). The control (M = 3.60, SD = 1.34) did not vary from the high politeness condition (M = 3.00, SD = 2.55, p = .65), which in turn did not vary from the low politeness condition (M = 4.00, SD = 1.73). It was only when the BJW was low that participants reduced the severity of punishment for the control (M= 1.40, SD = .54) and in comparison to the more polite condition (M = 3.63, SD = 2.20; F(1, 118) = 4.80, p < .05). The
punishment was low even for the less polite condition as well ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.21$) in comparison to the more polite condition ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 2.20$; $F(1, 118) = 3.83, p < .05$). This result was despite the fact that the interaction of BJW and politeness in the advertisement on morality judgments was not significant ($p = .22$).

**Discussion**

Those low in BJW indicated higher punishment for the brand which used more polite language over the brand with less polite language and the control. Thus, our hypothesis that the consumers will penalize brands differently based on the politeness of the language used in an advertisement was supported.

**Study 2**

The objective of Study 2 was to evaluate whether the penalty imposed on different brands would manifest in the fine amounts.

**Design and Participants**

Participants ($N = 167$; 56.9% female; $M_{age} = 34.08$) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (levels of politeness in advertising: more polite vs. less polite). Participants were asked to review an advertisement of the fictitious coffee brand called Jaunt. The tag line used in the advertisement varied on two levels of politeness. In the more polite condition, participants read *Are you going to have a cup of coffee?* In the less polite condition, participants read *Gonna have a cup of coffee?* Participants were then told: *Recently, Jaunt was in the press. The press report noted that: Jaunt collaborates with local farmers in Peru, but they do not contribute to infrastructure improvement in Peru* (pretested $M = 3.64$; $SD = 1.51$). Participants were then asked to quantify the punishment levied against the brand.

**Procedures and Measures**

Participants were asked *If the Peru government had to levy a fine on Jaunt what would it be?* Participants were asked to indicate the fine for the company on a $0$ to $250,000.00$ sliding scale (modified from previous research where consumers levied fines for company misconduct [e.g. Ashton-James and Tracy 2012; Rosenblatt et al. 1989]). Following this, participants were asked the BJW scale as used in Study 1.

**Results**

**Hypothesis Testing.** An ANCOVA was conducted with politeness in the advertisement and the composite score of BJW ($a = .89$) as predictors of fines levied by participants. There was a significant effect of politeness in advertising the fine levied ($F(1, 163) = 5.34, p < .05, \eta^2 = .032$). There was also a significant effect of BJW on severity of punishment ($F(1, 163) = 3.75, p < .05, \eta^2 = .023$). There was a significant interaction between politeness in the advertisement and BJW ($F(1, 164) = 3.92, p < .05, \eta^2 = .025$). A spotlight analysis revealed that when BJW was high, the fine did not vary significantly among the two levels of politeness ($p = .96$). Specifically, the fine levied in the more polite condition ($M = 10,626.63$, $SD = 29,806.24$) did not vary from the less polite condition ($M = 10,138.91$, $SD = 28869.13$). It was only when BJW was low that the fine levied was low for the less polite condition ($M = 23,614.33$, $SD = 38,476$) in comparison to the more polite condition ($M = 240,904.92$, $SD = 433,574.67$; $F(1, 163) = 7.75, p < .01$). This result was even though the interaction of BJW and politeness in the advertisement on morality judgments was not significant ($p = .34$).

**Discussion**

Those high in BJW showed no significant difference in the fine as a measure of punishment between two advertisements with varied politeness levels in the language. Those low in BJW, however, indicated a higher fine for the brand which used more polite language. It seems plausible that when individuals believe that people get what they deserve, the effectiveness of punishment would be diminished. By the same token those low in BJW, would probably view the advertising strategy of adopting politeness as an attempt at misleading consumers.

**Study 3**

The objective of this study was to evaluate the role of both brand trust in a brand and the consumer cynicism in the observed condemnation by consumers. To evaluate this, we adopted ethical statements that were judged to be either low or high on ethical ratings in the pretest.

**Design and Participants**

Participants ($N = 162; 56.2% female; M_{age} = 37.7$) were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (ethical rating: high vs. low). A known brand (GEICO) was selected for this study. Participants were told that GEICO was recently in the press. In the low ethical condition, participants read: *A press report noted that GEICO hires women who work in cooperatives, however, these women are sometimes criminals who don’t pay their taxes (pretested $M = 2.77$, $SD = 1.17$). Participants in the high ethical condition read: A press report noted that GEICO helps disadvantaged communities, but the help is only through volunteer service and not monetary in nature (pretested $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.41$). These two statements were significantly different on ethical rating ($t(58.01) = 7.22, p < .001$).

**Procedures and Measures**

After reviewing the advertisement and the press statement, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which GEICO did something morally wrong on the same scale as used in Study 1. Participants then rated the degree of punishment of GEICO. Participants were also asked to provide ratings to capture cynicism on a two-item scale: *I feel cynical about GEICO; I feel skeptical about GEICO’s business practices* (anchored: $1 = $strongly disagree; $7 = strongly agree$). Then brand trust was captured using three items: *I trust GEICO; GEICO is an honest brand; GEICO is a safe brand* (anchored: $1 = $strongly disagree; $7 = strongly agree; adapted from Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001$).

**Results**

**Morbidity and Punishment.** An analysis of the effect of ethical practice on perception that GEICO did something morally wrong was higher when presented with a less ethical practice ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.53$) in comparison to the more ethical practice ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.50$; $t(159.94) = 6.34, p < .001$). An analysis of the effect of ethical practice on severity of punishment yielded a significant difference with participants wanting more punishment for the less ethical practice ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.33$) in comparison to the more ethical practice ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.50$; $t(160) = 8.06; p < .001$).

**Mediation Analysis.** To determine whether cynicism or trust accounted for participants’ perception of GEICO, we conducted a mediation analysis (Hayes 2012, Model 4; bootstrapped with 5,000 draws). The analysis revealed that although the ethical practice influenced both cynicism and trust, only cynicism mediated the relationship between how ethical GEICO’s practice was and participant’s perception of how moral GEICO was (95% CI = [−.42, −.04]) but trust did not mediate the relationship between how ethical GEICO’s practice was and participant’s perception of how moral GEICO was (95% CI = [−.02, .22]). On the other hand, when the same mediation analysis (Hayes 2012, Model 4; bootstrapped with 5,000 draws) was conducted, both cynicism (95% CI = [−.50, −.06]) and trust (95% CI = [.01, .31]) mediated the effect of ethical practice on level of punishment.
Discussion. The participants of Study 3 indicated that GEICO did more morally wrong when the brand was presented with the less ethical practice than with the more ethical practice. They punished GEICO more for their less ethical practice compared to the more ethical practice. The result indicated that the participants felt more cynical when they were exposed to GEICO performing a less ethical practice in comparison to the more ethical practice. Individuals trusted GEICO more when presented with a more ethical practice than a less ethical practice. Mediation analyses showed that cynicism was the only mediator of the relationship between the ethical practice and moral perception. Both trust and cynicism were found to be significant mediators of the relationship between ethical practice of the brand and punishment.

General Discussion

We add on work by Eyal et al. (2008) by showing that politeness increases social distance and increased social distance leads to greater judgements of wrongdoing. Based on past research on BJW, our findings show that the language used in a brand’s advertising can potentially harm the brand when it is undergoing a brand crisis (i.e., an ambiguously unethical business practice reported by the media). Individuals in our studies consistently showed that they would more likely punish a brand which used more polite language in their advertising compared to the brand which used less polite language. Our results showed that the influence of the politeness of the language used in advertising was only significant for the individuals with low BJW. These results correspond to past findings that those low in BJW believe people often exploit others to their advantage, particularly those of higher power and status (Lipkus 1992). Thus, a possible explanation would be that those low in BJW were more cautious of the actions of the brand and thus reacted to its unethical business practice differently.

REFERENCES


