



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Moral Compensation and the Environment: Affecting Individuals' Moral Intentions Through How They See Themselves As Moral**

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Across two studies, we find that having people engage in extreme, but not moderate, moral recalls leads to compensatory environment-related moral behavior. We propose that this effect is due to the ability of extreme moral behavior to alter individuals' moral self-images and hence their desires to alter these states via moral behavior.

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or not. Consistent with our theorization, we found that participants who were exposed to the non-abundance cue responded slower to abundance related words than participants initially exposed to the abundance cue, and that there was no significant difference in the response times for neutral words across conditions.

Experiment 3 tests whether the perception of abundance vs. non-abundance is sufficient to prompt conservation in subsequent consumption. We show that providing the same amount of resource (1/3 cup of cooking oil) in a larger vs. smaller container led participants to perceive the resource as less abundance and subsequently motivated them to taking an extra action to conserve energy (turn off lights when leaving an empty room). Importantly, we find that when the cooking oil was provided in the bigger vs. smaller cup, participants still indicated that they had sufficient amount of resources. These findings suggest that the deviation from abundance (i.e., non-abundance, denoting the sufficient but non-excessive supply of resources) rather than scarcity (i.e., denoting insufficient supply) is adequate to prompt conservation behaviors.

In the last experiment, we discriminate against different theoretical accounts that could be responsible for the carry-over effect of incidental resource cues on conservation. We find that giving participants a chance to conserve in a social domain that is unrelated to consumption before taking resources for subsequent consumption attenuated the influence on non-abundance cues on conservation. These results suggest that the underlying mechanism is motivational, as once the motivation is satisfied, participants no-longer engaged in conserving behaviors. However, the non-motivational accounts of priming conservation-related concepts and traits predict the opposite pattern, as engaging in a conservation action would have made conservation-related concepts and traits even more accessible and salient. Our findings are consistent with recent literature on “green licensing” showing that purchasing green products can produce unintended effects licensing people to act unethically in subsequent tasks (Mazar and Zhong 2010).

This research offers several theoretical contributions. While extant consumer behavior literature has primarily focused on consumption, our theoretical approach also incorporates resource acquisition. While the level of specificity examined in the existing literature on supply and usage is domain specific, our research demonstrates that cues suggesting non-excessiveness of a particular resource not only influence perceptions of the cue-specific resource but also impact the cognitive accessibility of the general notion of abundance and therefore trigger conservation behaviors regarding an unrelated resource. Our findings also offer implications for marketing practitioners. From a firm’s standpoint, costs can be curtailed if employees waste fewer resources. Additionally, it is in the firms’ best interest that consumers waste less when (1) consumers pay a fixed price and then make consumption quantity decisions, (2) consumers have the option to use firm resources that they do not have to pay for.

### **Moral Compensation and the Environment: Affecting Individuals’ Moral Intentions Through How They See Themselves as Moral**

#### **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

To maintain a positive moral self-image, individuals engage in compensation: current moral behavior licenses future immoral behavior and current immoral behavior stimulates future moral behavior (Jordan et al., 2011; Monin & Miller, 2001; Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). In the current investigation, we examine the relationship between behaviors that stimulate changes to one’s moral self-image (Jordan et al., 2011) and his or her ethical intentions and actions. We

argue that moral compensatory effects are a function of changes to one’s moral self-image. In other words, it is not the mere priming of a moral or immoral frame via one’s behavior that leads to compensatory effects. But rather, such behavior must be sufficient enough to impact one’s moral self-image in order to lead to compensatory effects. Recalls or priming that only lead to small changes to the moral self (i.e., are not severe) are unlikely to have an impact on one’s self-image (Baumeister, 1999).

We examine this question via two studies. In Study 1, we have individuals recall either few or many (im)moral behaviors that they take in regards to the environment. In Study 2, we provide individuals with either minor or extreme feedback about the states of their moral selves. We then examine their intent to engage, as well as their actual engagement in, in various moral or immoral behaviors.

*Study 1.* We used a field-based experimental study to investigate the relationship between the valence and magnitude of one’s moral recalls and subsequent intentions to behave ethically.

### **Participants, Design, and Procedures**

Through a partnership with a CO<sub>2</sub> offsetting NGO, we surveyed 186 individuals who had offset their flight emissions. These participants first recalled their past (im)moral behavior, after which they were asked about their support for programs encouraging CO<sub>2</sub> emission offsetting, constituting our dependent variable. We manipulated moral self-image via a 2 x 2 between-participants design: the valence of participants’ recalled behavior (moral/immoral behaviors) and the magnitude of their recalled behavior (either asked to recall two or eight environment-related activities). To measure ethical intentions, individuals were then asked to indicate how likely they would be to (1) support regulations for mandatory CO<sub>2</sub> offsetting premiums, (2) how willing they would be to pay a mandatory premium for CO<sub>2</sub> offsetting, and (3) how much they support corporate initiatives to offset CO<sub>2</sub> emissions even if it meant them having to pay higher prices ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### **Results**

Replicating the moral compensation effects, we found a main effect of recall,  $F(1, 185) = 4.87, p = .03$ . Individuals who recalled environmental conservation activities reported lesser intentions to engage in activities to offset their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions ( $M = 6.36, SD = 0.91$ ) than did those who recalled environmental destruction activities ( $M = 6.55, SD = 0.52$ ). In support of moral self hypothesis, results also demonstrated an interaction between the valence of recall and the magnitude of recall,  $F(1, 185) = 8.06, p = .005$ . Those who recalled eight moral items (i.e., those that elicited a more positive moral self-image) were significantly less likely to support programs to offset CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than were those who recalled eight immoral items (i.e., those that elicited a more negative moral self-image),  $t(185) = 3.31, p = .001$ . However, there was no difference between individuals who recalled two moral versus two immoral items,  $t(185) = 0.49, p = .63$ .

*Study 2.* Study 2 extends the results of Study 1 by more obtrusively manipulating the state of individuals’ moral selves via providing them with explicit moral-self feedback. Also, in contrast to Study 1, we examine the effects on both immoral behavior and environmentally-related moral behavior.

Participants were 106 students. We manipulated moral self-image by providing individuals with feedback on the states of their moral selves. Participants believed that they were participating in two separate studies. They were first asked to write about the activities they do to help the environment. We then told them that this was actually a validated measure of people’s moral selves. Participants

then received one of five types of feedback: they were (1) highly above, (2) slightly above, (3) slightly below, or (4) highly below average in morality. A control condition received no feedback. They then began Study 2, which they were told was about transferring paper-and-pencil measures to the computer. They had to complete 15 math problems in their heads and had an opportunity to cheat on each. We measured how many times, out of the 15, they looked at the answers (Jordan et al., 2011; von Hippel et al., 2005). At the end of the study, we gave them a coupon, which they could cash in for a drink at the university's café (valued at €1.40) or could place in a box, and €2 would be donated to the environmental charity, Greenpeace, on their behalves.

## Results

As predicted by the moral compensation hypothesis, there was an effect of moral feedback, such that individuals who received feedback that they were highly moral ( $M = 6.31$ ,  $SD = 7.62$ ), cheated on significantly more problems than those receiving feedback that they were highly immoral ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 2.61$ ),  $t(18.28) = -2.18$ ,  $p = .04$ ; however, consistent with the moral self hypothesis, there was no difference for those receiving feedback that they were slightly moral vs. immoral,  $t(35.78) = .09$ ,  $p = .93$ . In addition, extremity of moral feedback affected individuals' generosity towards the environment,  $\chi^2(1,106) = 13.63$ ,  $p = .02$ , with 3 out of 16 individuals in the extremely moral condition versus 9 out of 17 in the extremely immoral condition donating it to Greenpeace. In contrast, these values for the slightly above and below conditions were equivalent (7/19 for the slightly above; 10/19 for the slightly below).

These findings provide support for our prediction that moral compensation operates through changes to individuals' moral self-image: one's moral or immoral self-recalls must be substantial enough to impact how much he or she sees him or herself as a moral person. Current experiments are examining actual changes to individuals' moral selves and how these changes explain these compensatory findings.

### When You Don't Care Enough to Give the Very Best: When Gifting Leads to Less (vs. More) Green Choices

#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumers often need to decide what gifts to give to valued others. They often face choices between environmentally or ethically inferior vs. superior versions of the same gift. Do you buy a box of chocolates or Fair Trade chocolates; a bottle of wine or biodynamic wine; a cotton or organic cotton shirt; a bouquet of tulips or Rainforest Alliance Certified tulips for those you love? Retailers and media outlets increasingly emphasize opportunities to give green gifts, but we know relatively little about when and why consumers choose to give environmentally and ethically superior vs. inferior gifts. Common wisdom would suggest that consumers spend more or buy superior goods for people they care most about. However, we find that the signal value of green gifts changes across different types of relationships and gender, challenging common assumptions regarding when consumers choose to give green.

While most people claim they care about environmental conservation and view themselves as ethical individuals, it is likely that, in the past, they have chosen to purchase environmentally unfriendly or unethically produced products (e.g., products produced through child labor or environmental degradation). We know that ethicality can influence the likelihood consumers purchase products *for themselves* (Luchs, Naylor, Irwin, and Raghunathan 2009; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Stahilevitz and Meyers 1998). However, we

know relatively little about when and why consumers are motivated purchase green products *for others*. Research on gift-giving (Belk, 1979; Otnes and Beltramini, 1996; Vesterlund, 2006) suggests that individuals' motives for offering gifts and factors that influence gift-giving vary markedly; they include duty, self-interest, love, reciprocity, compliance with social norms, and concern for others (Goodwin, Mick and DeMoss 1990; Smith, and Spiggle, 1990; Sherry, 1983; Wolfinger, 1990). Notably, gifts offer an important form of symbolic communication (Sherry, 1983) and impose an identity on both the giver and the receiver (Schwartz, 1967). In sum, gift exchanges hold tremendous signal value. To date, very little is known about what drives consumers' demand for green products when given as gifts. The present research addresses this gap and asks the following question: when and why do consumers choose more vs. less green gifts for others? We investigate this question across different types of gifts and different types of relationships (i.e., romantic vs. platonic).

In study one, we examine choices of products gifted to a significant other (romantic partner) for a major holiday. The study employed a 2 (media exposure: yes vs. no) x 2 (respondent's gender: male vs. female) between-subject factorial design. The media exposure manipulation consisted of a 4-minute video from NBC's Today Show about opportunities to buy green gifts (media exposure condition) or not (no media condition) prior to making their choices. Greenness of gifts was operationalized through the use of standard vs. fair trade brands of chocolate and greeting cards. Participants examined actual products and chose one of the two products to gift to their romantic partner; 5% of the participants (randomly chosen) received the actual product of their choice. We found that the percentage of females choosing green gifts was significantly *lower* than their male counterparts. Here the green option may simply be seen as an added benefit rather than having ethicality or signaling implications. Thus, in study two we manipulate the explicitness of ethicality information.

In study two, participants were asked to choose one of two bottles of wine as a gift for their significant other for a special occasion. Study 2 consisted of a 2 media exposure (yes vs. no) x 2 (respondent's gender: male vs. female) x 2 information about ethicality (explicit vs. implicit) between-subject design. Consistent with study 1, females chose fewer green gifts for romantic others, regardless of whether the ethicality information was implicit or explicit. Since females are typically thought to be more responsive to ethical and conservation appeals, these findings are noteworthy. Under what circumstances *do* females give green gifts? In particular, to what extent does the type of relationship matter?

In studies three and four, participants chose between two bouquets of flowers for a close female friend, and we varied the durability of the ethical cue. That is, whereas the marker of ethicality on packaging (e.g., a box containing chocolate or a bottle containing wine) is fleeting, gifts with enduring markers of ethicality may offer a different and more enduring signal. In study four, flowers were accompanied by branded vases, and in study five, participants made choices of durable goods (e.g., a shirt) for a friend. Respondent's gender (male vs. female) was measured; durability of ethical cue (not durable vs. durable) and knowledge of options (recipient knows vs. recipient does not know) were manipulated between subjects. We found that females were more likely to choose the green gift options, particularly for female friends, but only when the ethical information was durable. Study six replicates and extends these findings by systematically varying the gift-recipient (romantic partner vs. friend) within a single study and providing additional process evidence.

Previous work suggests that consumers buy lower quality green products for themselves as a "costly signal" associated with status (Griskevicius, Tybur, and Bram Van den Bergh 2010). In our studies,