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Research report

Completed egoism and intended altruism boost healthy food choices [☆]Christian Weibel ^{*}, Claude Messner, Adrian Brügger

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ABSTRACT

Based on the self-licensing literature and goal theory, we expected and found that *completed* (im)moral actions lead to markedly different food choices (Studies 1 & 2) than *intended* (im)moral actions (Study 2). In Study 1, people more often chose healthy over unhealthy food options when they recalled a completed egoistic action than when they recalled a completed altruistic action. Study 2 confirmed this finding and furthermore showed that the self-licensing effect in food choices is moderated by the action stage (completed *versus* intended) of the moral or immoral action. This article extends the existing self-licensing literature and opens up new perspectives for changing consumers' food consumption behavior.

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An unhealthy diet is one of the major risk factors for many common diseases like obesity or heart conditions (World Health Organization, 2013). Those severe health problems can be reduced by a more balanced diet. Very often this amounts to increasing vegetable and fruit consumption and to decreasing fat and sugar intake (Epstein et al., 2001; World Health Organization, 2013). However, many people have difficulties following a healthy diet. How can people be motivated to choose healthier food options (e.g., opting for an apple instead of a candy bar)?

Based on self-licensing (Monin & Miller, 2001), i.e., the tendency to compensate for previous moral or immoral actions, the present research first proposes and tests if immoral actions increase healthy food choices and moral actions decrease healthy food choices. A second major goal of this research is to better understand how *intended* moral actions influence compensatory behaviors. Previous self-licensing literature focused almost exclusively on *completed* (im)moral actions as a trigger of the self-licensing mechanism. However, it is unclear how *intended* moral actions affect subsequent moral actions. According to goal theory (e.g., Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996), behavioral *intentions* motivate consistent rather than compensatory behavior in order to reach the goal. This line of research converges with psychological

theories that posit that people try to avoid acting inconsistently (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Thus, we expect that predicting whether self-licensing will occur depends on whether an action is completed or intended. In other words, whether an (im)moral action is completed or intended should moderate the self-licensing effect.

Completed moral actions motivate inconsistent behavior

Self-licensing describes the mechanism by which completed moral actions boost people's moral self-concept, which in turn decreases the tendency to act morally (Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). Conversely, people compensate for completed immoral or egoistic actions by acting more morally or altruistically in the future (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009). Both mechanisms seem to be part of a homeostatic moral system that aims to reach a balanced condition. That is, if people feel above a certain level of morality, they feel authorized to engage in an immoral action. By contrast, if people transgressed, they feel the need to reestablish their moral self-worth by engaging in moral actions. These effects on subsequent behavior have been shown in various moral domains, like racism (Efron, Cameron, & Monin, 2009), sexism (Monin & Miller, 2001), pro-social behavior (Sachdeva et al., 2009), stealing (Mazar & Zhong, 2010), or cheating (Jordan, Mullen, & Murnighan, 2011). Self-licensing occurs not only when the initial and subsequent actions happen within the same moral domain (e.g., racial discrimination; Efron et al., 2009) but also when the domains are different (e.g., altruistic behavior and pro-environmental behavior; Sachdeva et al., 2009). This illustrates that a person's actions are interdependent rather than indepen-

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dent; current actions depend on past decisions, even when the actions do not take place within the same moral domain.

Morality and consumer behavior

Morality and self-licensing are also relevant in the context of everyday consumption choices. On the one hand, many consumer decisions have moral implications (McGregor, 2006). For instance, it is immoral to spend money on products that are not necessary (i.e., hedonic goods) since the spent amount could be given to people in need (Singer, 1972). Another finding that emphasizes the moral relevance of consumption is that buying luxury goods is associated with feelings of guilt (Dahl, Honea, & Manchanda, 2003). On the other hand, moral and immoral behaviors can also influence subsequent consumer choices. For instance, acting altruistically in a first task increases the probability of choosing a hedonic over a utilitarian good in a second task (Khan & Dhar, 2006).

Related to the decision between a utilitarian and a hedonic product is the decision between a healthy (apple) and an unhealthy food option (candy bar). This assumption is based on the conceptual and experiential similarity between the two dichotomies utilitarian *versus* hedonic and healthy *versus* unhealthy products. Specifically, unhealthy food options are often perceived as more tasty and more enjoyable (i.e., more hedonic) than healthy food options (Raghunathan, Naylor, & Hoyer, 2006). These findings seem to originate from the intuition or lay belief that tastiness and healthiness of food are inversely related (Raghunathan et al., 2006). Thus, we expect that the self-licensing effect found with hedonic and utilitarian products also applies to unhealthy and healthy food options.

Morality and food choices

Like consumer choices in general, food choices in particular are also tinged by morality because each individual can be held morally accountable for a healthy lifestyle (Brown, 2013). Research on consumption stereotypes furthermore suggests that people judge others based on what and how much they eat (for a review, see Vartanian, Herman, & Polivy, 2007). Importantly, these judgments also include how moral other people are perceived to be. For instance, people who eat non-fattening foods are rated as more moral than people who eat fattening foods (Stein & Nemeroff, 1995); or oatmeal eaters are perceived as more moral than pie eaters (Oakes & Slotterback, 2004–2005). The link between morality and food choices becomes even more apparent when considering intra-individual behavior. Specifically, recent findings suggest that self-licensing also applies to food choices. For instance, consumers increase their amount of hedonic food intake after an effortful task (de Witt Huberts, Evers, & de Ridder, 2012) and counterfactual sins (i.e., foregone indulgence) license future indulgence (Effron, Monin, & Miller, 2013). Similarly, prior shopping restraint increased the probability of choosing an indulgent food option (Mukhopadhyay & Johar, 2009). In contrast to these studies on self-licensing, our research focuses on how consumers can be motivated to choose healthy over unhealthy food options. First, we expect that based on self-licensing, completed immoral actions lead to inconsistent food choices, i.e., completed egoistic actions should lead to a higher rate of healthy food choices than completed altruistic actions. Second, we investigate circumstances (completed *versus* intended behavior) under which moral behavior motivates consistent healthy food choices.

Inconsistent versus consistent behavior

From a societal point of view, the consequences of inconsistent behavior (i.e., self-licensing) can be problematic. For instance,

people are more likely to steal after purchasing green products compared to purchasing conventional products (Mazar & Zhong, 2010). Thus, it would be more desirable if people acted in a morally consistent way, e.g., if altruistic behaviors would subsequently motivate people to act morally. Consistent moral (but not immoral) actions would represent more of a win–win situation for a society than inconsistent actions, e.g., if altruistic actions are followed by healthy food choices and not unhealthy food choices.

In contrast to the self-licensing literature, many psychological theories suggest that people prefer to act consistently and avoid acting inconsistently, as it is perceived as uncomfortable (Festinger, 1957). The classic foot-in-the-door effect (Freedman & Fraser, 1966), for example, demonstrates that people are more likely to perform a helping behavior when they are previously asked for a small helpful act. Thus, an important question concerns the circumstances under which people license past behavior and when they act consistently (e.g., being primed with a moral goal and choosing healthy food). A few studies have recently identified possible moderators for the licensing effect and showed circumstances under which people act consistently or inconsistently with previous actions: moral priming *versus* moral behavior (Mazar & Zhong, 2010), concrete *versus* abstract construal level (Conway & Peetz, 2012), low *versus* high costs (Gneezy, Imas, Brown, Nelson, & Norton, 2012) and level of attitudes (Effron et al., 2009).

Another potential moderator is the action stage of (im)moral behavior: Completed *versus* intended actions. Whereas the self-licensing mechanism is based on completed actions and motivates inconsistent behavior, goal theory (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996) focuses on intended actions and suggests that people act consistently rather than inconsistently with previous actions. For example, the goal of eating healthy food today should lead people to act consistently with regard to this behavioral intention. Thus, we expect that action stage (completed *versus* intended) of the initial moral or immoral action is relevant to predicting whether people act consistently or inconsistently with the initial action.

Intended moral actions motivate consistent behavior

Self-licensing occurs because one's moral behavioral *history* allows acting in a morally problematic way (Merritt et al., 2010). In other words, previous moral behavior endows people with a license to follow selfish impulses and “to take an action without fear of discrediting themselves” (Miller & Effron, 2010, p. 116).

It is an open question if not yet realized moral behavioral intentions also license problematic actions in the present (i.e., unhealthy food choices). Self-licensing occurs when people have shown in the past that they are altruistic or egoistic, i.e., the altruistic or egoistic action has been completed. For example, people accumulate a surplus of “moral currency” when they acted in an altruistic way in their past (Sachdeva et al., 2009), and this in turn licenses them to choose unhealthy food options. In contrast, simply forming a behavioral intention to act altruistically in the future should not license the choice of unhealthy food options. Forming a behavioral intention to act morally or do good in the future should not provide enough evidence for one's morality to license unhealthy food choices in the present. In this case, the intention has not been realized and people have not yet proven that they are moral. Thus, the surplus of “moral currency,” to continue the metaphor, has not yet accumulated, and self-licensing should not occur.

There are important theoretical reasons suggesting that moral behavioral intentions should motivate consistent behavior. According to goal theory (Gollwitzer, 1990, 1993; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996) and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985), moral behavioral intentions should motivate people to act consistently with their intentions. The result of forming a moral behavioral intention is that people are committed to realizing the moral goal

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